



WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION ARTICLE

Why Employees Find It Difficult to Be Assertive at Work

A practical guide to speaking clearly, setting boundaries and disagreeing respectfully

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WHY EMPLOYEES FIND IT DIFFICULT TO BE ASSERTIVE AT WORK

Speaking up is rarely difficult because people have nothing to say. It is difficult because saying it can feel risky.

	The late assignment: A manager gives an employee an additional assignment late in the afternoon and expects it to be completed the next morning. The employee already has two important deadlines but replies, "I will try."
	The silent disagreement: During a meeting, a team member disagrees with the direction being proposed but remains silent. Later, she complains to a colleague that the decision will not work.
	The unresolved message: An employee receives a message that appears abrupt and disrespectful. Instead of addressing it, he withdraws from the person and allows the resentment to grow.

These are common workplace situations. The people involved usually know that they should say something, but they are uncertain about what to say, when to say it and how the other person will react.

This is why assertiveness is not simply the ability to speak. It is the ability to express a view, concern or need clearly while continuing to respect the other person.



Assertiveness Is Not About Winning

Assertive people are sometimes described as strong personalities who are naturally confident and comfortable with confrontation. This creates the impression that assertiveness is a personality trait which some people possess and others do not.

In reality, assertiveness is a communication skill that can be learnt and practised.

It does not mean dominating a conversation, refusing to compromise or insisting that others accept your position. It also does not require you to become confrontational.

A person is being assertive when they are able to:

- express an opinion even when others may disagree;
- ask for clarity instead of working with assumptions;
- set a reasonable boundary;
- raise a concern before it becomes a larger problem;
- disagree without attacking another person; and
- listen to a different point of view without immediately surrendering their own.

The purpose is not always to secure agreement. Sometimes the purpose is simply to ensure that your position has been understood.

Three Different Responses to the Same Pressure

PASSIVE	ASSERTIVE	AGGRESSIVE
Gives in without explaining constraints. “I will try.”	States the constraint and asks for a decision. “I can complete this tomorrow, or we can change the priority.”	Blames or attacks the other person. “This deadline is ridiculous.”

Why Speaking Up Can Feel Risky

Most people who struggle with assertiveness are not unable to communicate. They communicate comfortably in many situations. The difficulty arises when speaking honestly appears to carry a risk.

Fear of Damaging a Relationship

People often remain silent because they want to preserve a working relationship.

They may worry that saying “no” to a manager will make them appear uncooperative, disagreeing with a colleague will create tension or correcting a client will affect future business.

The intention is usually positive. They want to keep the relationship peaceful. However, silence does not always protect a relationship.

When concerns remain unspoken, people begin to make assumptions about one another. Frustration may appear through delayed responses, avoidance, sarcasm or a lack of cooperation. What could have been discussed as a small issue gradually becomes personal.

A respectful conversation may create some temporary discomfort, but it can prevent a much more difficult conflict later.

KEY IDEA

Organisational Hierarchy

Assertiveness becomes more difficult when there is a significant difference in authority.

An employee may be comfortable expressing a view to a colleague but hesitant to disagree with a senior leader. A new manager may avoid addressing the behaviour of an experienced team member. A vendor may agree to an unrealistic request because the customer represents an important account.

Hierarchy is a reality in organisations. However, respect for authority does not require people to withhold relevant information.

Instead of: “This deadline is completely unreasonable.”

Try: “We can complete the work by Friday if we move the other assignment to next week. Would you like us to prioritise this one?”

The second response does not challenge the manager’s authority. It provides information that is necessary for a sound decision.

The Fear of Being Misunderstood

Assertiveness can be difficult because people do not have complete control over how their words will be interpreted.

A direct message may be described as rude. A request for clarification may be treated as resistance. A person who sets a boundary may be accused of not being a team player.

This is especially relevant when communication takes place through email, WhatsApp, Teams or other workplace messaging platforms. A short reply that appears efficient to the sender may sound dismissive to the receiver because tone of voice and facial expression are absent.

For sensitive subjects, a conversation is often better than a series of hurried messages. Where written communication is necessary, it helps to read the message again from the other person’s point of view before sending it.

Uncertainty About the Right Words

Many people avoid an assertive conversation because they do not know how to begin it.

They rehearse several versions in their mind. One sounds too weak. Another sounds too aggressive. Finally, they either say nothing or speak only after their frustration has reached a point where remaining calm is difficult.

Assertiveness becomes easier when we stop searching for the perfect sentence and prepare a few clear points instead.

1 What exactly happened?	2 Why is it a concern?	3 What would I like to change?	4 What response am I willing to consider?
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This preparation helps separate the actual issue from the emotion surrounding it.

A Practical Way to Structure an Assertive Conversation

An assertive message does not need to be long. In fact, lengthy explanations can make the main point difficult to understand.

A useful approach is to describe the situation, explain its effect and make a clear request.

01 DESCRIBE	02 EXPLAIN	03 REQUEST	04 LISTEN
State what happened without judging the person.	Clarify why the situation matters.	Say clearly what you need.	Allow the other person to respond.

Describe the Situation

Begin with what happened rather than making a judgement about the person.

Instead of: "You never keep me informed."

Try: "The date of the client presentation was changed yesterday, but I learnt about it only this morning."

SPECIFIC FACTS ARE EASIER TO DISCUSS THAN GENERAL ACCUSATIONS

The first statement is likely to produce an argument about whether the person "never" communicates. The second gives both people a specific situation to discuss.

Explain Why It Matters

People are more likely to understand a concern when they know its impact.

"When I receive the information at the last minute, I do not have sufficient time to prepare the presentation or review the figures."

EXPLAIN THE CONSEQUENCE WITHOUT ASSIGNING MOTIVE

This explains the consequence without accusing the other person of deliberately creating a problem.

State What You Need

Do not assume that the other person will work out what you want.

"Please include me when presentation dates are changed so that I can plan the work."

MAKE THE REQUEST SPECIFIC

The request is specific and gives the other person something practical to respond to.

Allow the Other Person to Respond

Assertiveness is a two-way process. After stating your position, listen to the response.

There may be information you do not have. The other person may explain a constraint, offer an alternative or disagree with your request. Listening does not mean that you must withdraw what you have said. It means that the discussion remains a conversation rather than becoming a declaration.

How to Say No Without Sounding Unhelpful

One of the most common assertiveness challenges at work is refusing a request.

Some people give an immediate “yes” and later struggle to complete the work. Others provide such a long explanation that the refusal sounds uncertain and invites further pressure.

A professional refusal can acknowledge the request while making the constraint clear.

“I understand that this is urgent. I am currently completing the proposal that has to go to the client today. I can begin this tomorrow morning, or we can discuss which assignment should take priority.”

ACKNOWLEDGE • CLARIFY • OFFER A PRACTICAL OPTION

This response does not simply reject the work. It makes the existing workload visible and allows a decision to be made.

There will also be situations in which a more direct answer is necessary:

“I will not be able to take this on within the required time.”

A CLEAR BOUNDARY DOES NOT ALWAYS REQUIRE AN APOLOGY

A reasonable boundary does not always require an apology. It does, however, require clarity and a respectful tone.

Assertiveness During Meetings

Meetings present a different challenge. People have less time to prepare their response, and the presence of several colleagues can make disagreement feel more exposed.

It is possible to disagree without turning the discussion into a contest.

“I see the situation differently.”	“May I raise one concern before we make the decision?”
“Could we look at the possible impact on the customer?”	“I agree with the objective, but I am not certain that this approach will achieve it.”

These statements allow a person to question an idea without questioning the competence or intentions of the individual who suggested it.

When someone repeatedly interrupts, an assertive response could be:

“I would like to complete the point, and then I will respond to your question.”

CALM DELIVERY IS PART OF THE MESSAGE

The words are important, but delivery also matters. A calm voice, steady pace and neutral expression will usually be more effective than speaking faster or louder.

When Assertiveness Does Not Produce Agreement

People sometimes conclude that an assertive conversation has failed because the other person did not agree with them.

Agreement is not the only measure of success.

The conversation may still have been useful if:

- the issue was clearly identified;
- both people understood the other's position;
- expectations were clarified;
- a boundary was communicated; or
- the matter was addressed before resentment increased.

There may be occasions when the other person continues to behave unreasonably or refuses to discuss the concern. Assertiveness does not mean tolerating repeated disrespect. Depending on the seriousness of the situation, it may become necessary to document the issue, approach a manager or use the organisation's formal process.

The first step, wherever appropriate, is usually to address the matter clearly and early.

Assertiveness Requires Practice

Knowing the principles of assertiveness is different from applying them during an uncomfortable conversation.

People often return to their usual behaviour when they are under pressure. A person who is normally passive may continue explaining until the message disappears. Another may become abrupt because directness feels safer than vulnerability.

Practice helps people recognise these patterns.

In our [assertiveness training](#) programmes, we find that participants benefit from working with actual workplace situations rather than discussing assertiveness only as a concept. A conversation with a demanding customer requires a different approach from disagreeing with a manager. Giving corrective feedback to an employee is different from asking a colleague to respect a boundary.

Role plays, facilitator feedback and repeated practice allow participants to test different words and observe how small changes in tone or body language affect the conversation.

Finding Your Voice Without Losing Respect

Assertiveness is not about speaking at every opportunity. It is about recognising the occasions when silence may create a greater problem than speaking.

It allows people to say what needs to be said without humiliating another person. It also allows them to listen and negotiate without abandoning their own position.

An assertive employee does not need to be the loudest person in the room. The message may be delivered quietly. What matters is that it is clear, respectful and honest.

THE ESSENCE OF ASSERTIVENESS

The next time you hesitate to raise a concern, begin with three questions:

- What needs to be understood?
- What needs to change?
- How can I say it without attacking the other person?

That is often where assertiveness begins.

About the Author



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Vikas Vinayachandran is a certified Coach and Leadership Facilitator. His ability to establish a deep connection with participants gives him the unique skill to leave an indelible mark in the lives of his trainees. He has over 15 years of experience conducting training programs for various levels of management in Fortune 500 companies. He has an MBA from the prestigious Lancaster University Management School, UK.

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