

## Assertiveness as a skill

Brendan Lloyd PhD, December 2020, r:02

---

Assertiveness is all about asking for what you need, or saying no to what you don't need. Often people's eyes roll back in their heads when I mention assertiveness. "As if I need assertiveness; I'm very assertive", she says aggressively.

Ok, just demanding what you want or refusing what you don't want is not necessarily being assertive, particularly if you are not effective, and particularly if you are merely being aggressive or a bully.

Being assertive is not about being nice nor is it about being nasty. It is about being effective. In other words, it is about giving yourself the best chance to keep off the *emergency button*<sup>i</sup> as much as possible in those challenging interpersonal situations.

People make three basic errors with assertiveness...

1. Unclear objective.
2. Use hints.
3. Get put off by the pushback.

Clarify your objective. You need to be clear about what you want or what you don't want. In your mind, before you start, state your objective in one short sentence. If you need more than one sentence then most likely you have more than one objective. Separate your objectives and work on the most important, one at a time.

This clarity needs to be there in your mind before you start talking.

Your objective is not likely to clarify if you just wing it. If you begin to talk with a vague objective you will probably sound vague as well. Be clear about what you want or don't want. By being clear you'll give yourself the best chance of success.

In relation to the second error, people will hint to get what they need or don't need. This is one of the most common mistakes with assertiveness, or at least the lack of it. You can hint, then hint, then hint, it never happens, and then *POW*, you're off the Richter<sup>ii</sup>; back on the emergency button; living the stress.

In relation to point three, sure, you'll get pushback when you assert yourself. After all we're talking about assertiveness as a skill that is needed for challenging interpersonal situations. All the same, there is no need to cave-in or just give-up if you know what you're doing and you know how to do it.

With assertiveness skills you can always give it your best shot. There are tools that will help you to develop these skills. These tools become your skills with a bit of practise.

There are two skill-sets to talk about here. These are the *Levels of Firmness* and the *DEAR MAN*. These tools give you options and structure to work with.

### Levels of Firmness

*Levels of Firmness* can be found in Appendix A. Assertiveness as a skill is not just all-or-nothing. There are shades of grey. It's not just on or off. We can think of assertiveness as having options over seven *Levels of Firmness*. Here are a couple of scenarios to illustrate the point.

Scenario 1: You're the boss in a small retailing business. You know that one of your employees is short-changing your customers. In this case the relationship that you have with this person is defined under the industrial relations laws. You can go in at the top level of firmness without fear of anything.

You would not, for example, hint to this

employee that she should give the correct change to the customers. You would be very firm and you would *not take no* for an answer. As a matter of fact you could even follow up with a letter or notification. In the example here the level of firmness is six, 'not taking no' (see appendix A).

Scenario 2: Your teenage child is not keeping up his end of the bargain with doing his chores, in exchange for receiving his weekly allowance. You have noticed a decline in the tidiness of his room and the lawns are getting shabby. It's the weekend and you see the ideal window of opportunity for him to mow the lawn and tidy his room. He on the other hand wants his pocket money and he wants to play footy with his mates. You know that if you're firm with him, he does tend to comply. So you can be firm in your requests and you can resist no. In this scenario the level of firmness is five because you're 'resisting no' with room for negotiation (see appendix A).

In these two scenarios we describe the difference between *Levels of Firmness – Six* and *Five*. In these two scenarios the relationships are well defined and the requests are both within the responsibilities of the person making the request. Every employer has the right to operate within the industrial laws and the right to expect that employees will act honestly in their work. Likewise parents are responsible for guiding their children toward becoming reliable and responsible adults.

There is no need to get on your emergency button when you take this type of pro-active approach to difficult interpersonal situations.

The idea is to begin your assertion at the highest optimal level of firmness. You can always ease-off but you will not ratchet-up successfully. For example, you could drop back from a firm 'Five' to a tentative 'Four'. On the other hand, you might come across as passive-aggressive if you try to ratchet-up.

Aim for the highest optimal level of firmness. You don't want to under cook it, but likewise it's no good to overcook it either. For example,

in scenario one above, 'not taking no' is a reasonable and responsible position. It's not like it could be optional for the employee to continue short-changing the customers.

In scenario two you wouldn't want to go to level six. You wouldn't stick firmly to 'not taking no'. For example, if you're 'not taking no', what's the next step? Do you kick him out of the house if he doesn't mow the lawn and clean his room? I don't think so. There's no sense of proportion in applying a Level Six in scenario two.

Level five, 'resisting no' in scenario two is appropriate as a starting point. You would already have in place an agreement with your son. It's a matter of him living up to his end of the bargain. On the other hand you would bring a sense of proportion to your requirements of your teenage son. You would not use, 'not taking no'; you would instead 'resist no'; and you would negotiate the finer details of when and how the chores get done.

### 10 Factors to consider

There are *10 factors to consider* (appendix A) when setting your level of firmness. In other words, if the objective is very important, you are certain about your relationship with the other person, and your request or refusal does not compromise your values, with all other factors being equal, you can be quite firm from the beginning.

The first factor to consider is your priority; is it the **objective** or the **relationship**?

Assertiveness requires a good sense of proportion and occasion. For example is your **objective** more important than the **relationship**? If I get what I want or refuse what the other person wants, how will the other person feel about me? Also, how will I feel about myself if I don't get what I want or refuse what the other person wants?

Going back to scenarios one, the objective has priority over the relationship. The relationship is defined by industrial law at the very least. In scenario two, the relationship has priority. This is why we don't go for the all-or-nothing Level

Six.

There are 9 other factors to consider. For example, can it be done, is this the right time, do I know what I'm talking about, do I have the authority, are there rights, is it appropriate, etc.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the biggest mistakes that people make is to pitch their request at a hinting or tentative level, it never happens, then POW they're on their emergency button and stressed. In other words, not being effectively assertive will cause stress in you.

The beauty of the *levels of intensity* and *the 10 factors to consider* (in appendix A) is that it provides options and structure.

In terms of options, most people are scared of this idea of firmness until they see the *Levels of Firmness*. It's no longer a black-or-white affair. It is no longer all-or-nothing. There are degrees of freedom in the idea of firmness.

Sometimes you do need to use Level Three Hinting. For example, you may have done your homework and discovered that any level of firmness above Level Three will receive an outright 'No'. So you'd hint. This is where you'd need to rest your expectations to be effective; ie., off the emergency button, not stressed. It's not all or nothing; it's not all Level Six.

## DEAR MAN

The DEAR MAN acronym (see, appendix B) provides you with a structure. A normally unassertive person or uncertain person can rely on the structure. It's easy to remember DEAR MAN. It is easy to remember what each letter means. It only takes a few rehearsals to get it down pat. It's easier to appear confident when you have a structure to work with that makes sense.

Read the DEAR MAN in Appendix B. The first point is that you need to use words to *describe* the situation. For example, *"Here we are in the middle of the desert. It's hot and sandy and there's not a tree in sight."* Then you need to *express* what's on your mind. For example,

*"We need a tent, or at least a gazebo. We need shade."* You can't assume that they know what you mean, you need to *assert*. For example, *"Can you feel the heat?"* Then you *reinforce* your request for shade. *"You'd all feel a lot better if we could all get out of the sun."*

Assertiveness is for difficult interpersonal situations. So, the issues that you're dealing with will be difficult to begin with. If you're trying to assert yourself with difficult issues than you are at odds with the person you're dealing with. You will get push-back. Not only that, you might feel that you're under attack.

For example, if you're a batter in a cricket match, standing at the batting crease, then you could say that you're under attack from the bowler. In fact, then you get bouncers bowled at you, you are under attack. Bouncers are balls that come at your eyebrows at about 150kph. For these balls, you step aside, and let the ball go through to the keeper.

If you apply your bat when facing a bouncer, most likely you'll be caught and out. If you're trying to deal with the bouncers in an assertive situation, then you'll lose your objective. You will lose your objective in some argument over some other issue. Let the attacks go through to the metaphorical keeper.

"M" in MAN is mindfully stick to the point. Again, we reinforce the point to have a clear objective. You need a clear objective to go back to. When you're thrown off course, get back to your objective.

To stick to your objective, ignore the attacks and become a broken record. Just go back to the DEAR part where you use your words to describe, express, assert and reinforce.

If you have a clear objective and you're doing the DEAR MAN, you will appear confident. Even if you're not confident and yet you appear confident, the other party will not know that you're not confident.

To appear unconfident would be to give the other party confidence that you will fold. Speak directly to the other person. Do not fidget with your phone or documents. Listen attentively

and be interested in what the other person has to say.

Negotiate is last on the list because this is where it should be. After you have put everything on the table and you've given it your best shot, and you're still not over the line, then you can soften your level of firmness. In doing so you can see that it might help to advance your success. Or at the very least you

can revise your expectations. For example, *"We seem a bit stuck on this point, what do you think we should do?"*

Assertiveness skills require practise. Then it requires practise. Then it requires one more thing; this would be practise. The main lesson in DEAR MAN is to have a clear objective, give it your best shot with a sense of proportion.

## Appendix A

**Assertiveness skills: Levels of Firmness<sup>iii</sup>**

Level	For Asking	For Refusing
6	Firm, insist, don't take no	Firm refusal, don't give in
5	Firm, resist no	Firm refusal, resist giving in
4	Firm, prepared to take no	Firm refusal, but consider
3	Tentative	Express unwillingness
2	Hint openly	Express unwillingness, but say yes
1	Indirect hint	Express hesitation, but say yes
0	Don't ask, don't hint	Do whatever other person asks

**10 Factors to Consider**

1. Priority: The objective or the relationship.

If the objective is very important then go for a high level of firmness. Go for a more tentative level, or hinting level of firmness, if the relationship is tenuous or at risk.

	Ask firmly if...	Refuse firmly if...
2. Capacity:	The person is able to do what I'm asking or give me what I want.	If you haven't got what the person wants.
3. Timeliness:	This is the right time to ask.	This is the right time to say no.
4. Homework:	I know what I'm talking about. I have done the research and got the facts.	Someone is requesting something from me and it is not clear what they want.
5. Authority:	I am the person who should be asking this of the person.	This person should not be asking me for this.
6. Rights:	By asking I am not infringing on the person's rights.	By refusing I am not infringing on anybody's rights.
7. Relationship:	My request is appropriate to the relationship with the person.	What the other person wants is not appropriate to your relationship.
8. Reciprocity:	I am not always making demands.	I don't owe the person any favours.
9. Long versus short-term:	Will being submissive now, by either not asking for what I want or by giving in, get peace in the short-term but leave me feeling resentful in the end?	
10. Respect:	Or is this something that I can just do for my self, or can I just simply do what is asked of me? If so, then don't ask, or just do what is asked of you.	

## Appendix B

Assertiveness skills: DEAR MAN<sup>iv</sup>

D	Describe	Describe the situation. Lay out the facts, no theories. Paint the picture with words. This is not an argument it is a description.
E	Express	Don't expect the other person to read your mind. Don't expect the other person to know how hard it is for you. Don't expect that he/she will just understand. Let him/her know how important it is to you. Let him/her know what is important to you. This is not an argument, just an expression of values.
A	Assert	Be clear about what you want or don't want. Apply the highest optimal level of firmness. Be focused. Give it your full attention in real-time.
R	Reinforce	Telegraph up-front the benefits. Make it clear to him/her that there are benefits in his/her favour. Make sure that he/she understands this.
M	Mindfully	There will be push back. Stick to your objective. Don't be distracted by attacks or putdowns, let them go through to the keeper. If you're dealing with attacks and putdowns then you are off track. Get back on track by describing, expressing, asserting and reinforcing. Be a <i>broken record</i> and <i>ignore</i> the attacks. This is why you need a clear objective.
A	Appear Confident	To give yourself the best chance of success, you at least need to appear confident. If you look shaky or unsure, you have a chink in your armour. If you feel shaky but you look confident, they won't know.
N	Negotiate	You would negotiate last. You put your best case forward first. Only then will you be aware of your true position. You can lower your level of firmness with some give and take. You can help to resolve an impasse by asking, "Where do we go from here?" Or, "What do you need to make it work?"

<sup>i</sup> Emergency Button is a metaphor for the sympathetic response in the autonomic nervous system.

<sup>ii</sup> Off the Richter-Scale is a metaphor for an emotional explosion.

<sup>iii</sup> Adapted from: Linehan, M. M. (1993). *Skills training for treating borderline personality disorder*, page 71, The Guilford Press: New York

<sup>iv</sup> Adapted from: Linehan, M. M. (1993). *Skills training for treating borderline personality disorder*, page 79, The Guilford Press: New York