

Assertiveness as a skill

Brendan Lloyd PhD, December 2020, r:01

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* 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 to refuse what they 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 Richterⁱⁱ; 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 beauty in the DEAR MAN (appendix B) acronym is that it provides you with an easy way to structure how you're going to go about putting your request or making your refusal.

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.

Sometimes clients surprise me from time to time. One client was having a lot of trouble with her husband. She could never get him to do things with her. I had met them together and he seemed reasonable and plausible enough. He didn't seem like a nasty person. Yet she had this difficulty getting him to do things.

So I did a session on assertiveness with her. At first she was resisting. When I first mention "assertiveness" her eyes rolled back in head. "Assertiveness, I teach assertiveness to my clients as part of their training program" she said to me. We got to the 'mindfully' part of the DEAR MAN. I talked about sticking to her objective, whatever it might be at the time. I got to the bit where I say "don't be distracted from your objective by dealing with negative attacks from the person you want something from. Ignore the attacks".

As I spoke I turned around from the whiteboard to look at her. She was sitting forward in her seat. She was staring at me with her lower jaw dangling down near her ankles. She said to me "has my husband done this training with you? This is how he gets me off the track every time. He starts throwing in negative comments and subtle abuse. I get off my objective every time because I end up defending myself from his attacks."

She stared at me for a moment then said "that's how he does it." When the session was over and she left my office, I got the feeling that things were going to change around her place.

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 and stick to it.

Appendix A

Assertiveness skills: Levels of Firmnessⁱⁱⁱ

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^{iv}

D	Describe	Describe the situation. Lay out the facts. 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 they will just understand. Let them know how important it is to you. Let them know what is important to you.
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 to them for giving you what you want.
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?"

ⁱ Emergency Button is a metaphor for the sympathetic response in the autonomic nervous system.

ⁱⁱ Off the Richter-Scale is a metaphor for an emotional explosion.

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

^{iv} Adapted from: Linehan, M. M. (1993). *Skills training for treating borderline personality disorder*, page 79, The Guilford Press: New York