

## Are you an Assertive Communicator?

Do you know what it means to communicate assertively? It is often easier for us to recognize when someone is talking aggressively or passively because the verbal cues and body language are more apparent. Recognizing assertive communication on the other hand, is not always that straight forward.

The ideal style of communication is neither passive (submissive, enabling others to direct you while ignoring your own needs and have difficulty saying no) nor aggressive (dominate, getting your own way by forcing your needs/opinions onto others and denying them consideration) but assertive. Assertive people are honest about what they think and feel, they choose what they want and don't want to do and don't feel guilty about saying "no!" These people express their needs directly and respectfully and are compromise often. Assertive communication involves:

- Start sentences with "I." This helps you to own your feelings and thoughts. For example, "I feel/think/believe..." instead of attacking "You" statements that put the other on the defensive.
- Try to present your ideas in short, simple sentences focusing on facts
- If you want something - ask for it - but be prepared to be turned down
- Pay attention to your tone and volume of voice (normal and firm)
- Be direct in your requests and insist others are as well, "Could you please call me when you're running late?"

### Dealing with conflict and Constructive Criticism

Professional experts in conflict resolution are trained extensively to deescalate dangerous situations, mediate between two parties in conflict and deal with difficult people. Whether it is in the work place, or in a personal disagreement, you also can learn how best to deal with difficult people through better communication by learning the following tips (Chua, 1987):

- **Be calm:** Someone who is calm is seen as being in control, centered and more respectable. When the person you are dealing with sees that you are calm despite whatever he/she is doing, you will start getting their attention.
- **Understand the person's intentions:** Try to identify the person's trigger: What is making him/her act in this manner? What is stopping him/her from cooperating with you? How can you meet his/her needs and resolve the situation in mutually satisfying way?
- **Let the person know where you are coming from:** Letting them in on the reason behind your actions and the full background of what is happening will enable them to empathize with your situation. This helps them to get on-board much faster.
- **Treat the person with respect:** If you are going to treat the person with disrespect, it's not going to be surprising if he/she treats you the same way as well. As the golden rule says, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

- **Focus on action:** Sometimes, you may be put in a tense place by a difficult person, such as not receiving a piece of work they promised or being wrongly held responsible for something. Whatever it is, acknowledge that the situation has already occurred and focus on the practical positive steps you can take to forward yourself in the situation.

When it is time for you to have a talk and sort out issues with one another, do not criticize the other person as a whole, instead use “constructive criticism” or feedback, which is not motivated by a desire to hurt but to communicate and get your needs met. Practice the following tips in delivering criticism more constructively:

- Choose the right time and place, - away from the situation, when the other person is in a relaxed mood, don't wait until next time it happens
- Start and end with a compliment. Find something good to say about the person, this will help him or her take in your advice.
- Describe the behavior clearly and your feelings assertively, - "I feel sad when you ignore me." Don't blame or label them
- Ask for a specific change - "please turn your music down after 9pm"
- Be realistic in describing consequences, avoid empty threats
- Ask them how they feel about it. Get their input on the problem and express your appreciation for their time

Constructive criticism is a communication skill best learnt by practice. It is part of assertiveness and ask for a direct change of behavior. The field of communication is vast and thus it is near impossible to rely everything you need to know about how to become a better communicator. The aim of this article was to suggest useful strategies and give you a brief glimpse of good communication, the most important factor in successful healthy relationships.