

Once we bring two human beings together, whether at home or at work, we have set the stage for communication breakdown! In this article Brin Bendon investigates aspects of verbal and non-verbal communication which can prevent such breakdowns through the use of assertive communication.

Assertive

Firstly, we need to define our terms in order to discriminate between assertive and non-assertive behaviours such as aggression and passiveness.

Are you the kind of person who finds it difficult to say something critical or negative to someone because you feel that they might take it in the wrong way? You may be afraid that they will react negatively by becoming aggressive or defensive if you confront them with how you think or feel about a situation. Or, you might be concerned that they will be hurt or offended by any criticism. On the other hand, you may be the kind of person who has no difficulty in telling others precisely what you think about them and in no uncertain terms! Either way, if your hat fits any of the

descriptions outlined above, then you can profit from assertiveness.

Using assertion skills, you need feel none of these things. Assertive behaviour can help us when dealing with tricky situations. Assertive people are able to express how they think and feel openly with no embarrassment and without causing offence to others. They are able to say what they mean, mean what they say, in the right way, at the right time. Assertiveness enables people to feel OK about themselves and about others and helps others to feel positive about you.

Assertive communication enables us to ask for what we want without embarrassment, or to say 'NO' to unreasonable demands or requests without feeling guilty, to express how we think or feel openly and honestly and to ask questions when we don't

understand. It enables us to confront difficult situations and to challenge unacceptable behaviours when dealing with difficult people. It also helps us to negotiate acceptable agreements by seeking to gain win / win outcomes through workable compromise and to give and receive constructive feedback.

Non-verbal communication

Research carried out by Mehrabian at the University of California Los Angeles in 1971 revealed that Body Language accounts for 55% of the message, while vocal elements such as tone of voice account for 38% of the message with words only contributing 7% of the message. In other words, as Marshal McLuhan once put it, "It's not what you say but the way you say it." So what does assertive body language look like and how does it differ from aggressive or passive body language?

Hostile aggression is often associated with postures and gestures that we all recognise; pointing fingers, clenching fists, shoulders back with chin forward, and aggressive eye contact such as staring and sometimes accompanied by an invasion of our personal space. Hostile aggression can also be recognised by vocal and tonal qualities such as the raised voice or shouting with a harsh edge to the voice.

Not all aggression is hostile however. Manipulative aggression may look and sound quite different since it relies on other 'weapons' such as sarcastic digs, jokes at others expense, barbed comments or sulks and silence. A refusal to acknowledge someone by greeting them with silence and turning one's back on them when they are trying to speak can be just as aggressive as someone who shouts at them with a fixed stare. Why? Because both strategies are designed to



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achieve the same end. To win at others expense.

Passive behaviour can be recognised by quite different non-verbal and vocal behaviours. The body language of the passive person is non-threatening. The arms may be folded into a defensive posture. The eyes may be averted towards the ground, and the voice is down, with the mouth sometimes shielded by a 'protective' hand when they speak. Passive strategies are designed not to 'rock the boat' in order perhaps to avoid trouble and have an easy life. This they achieve by denying their personal rights. They allow others to win at their expense.

By contrast assertive behaviour looks quite different to either aggression or passivity.

Assertive body language looks positive because when people behave assertively they stand or sit with an upright posture while the shoulders are relaxed. They can hold relaxed eye contact. In place of the closed hand gestures of 'aggressives' and 'passives', we see open palm gestures. The voice tone is relaxed and level.

Assertive strategies result in quite different outcomes. Assertive people respect their own rights and the rights of others. They can stand up for themselves without infringing the rights of others. They have self respect and respect for others. They search for win/win outcomes.

However, being assertive does not only require skills. To be assertive we need to embrace a philosophy or a way of thinking about ourselves and others. At the heart of assertiveness is the issue of rights. They acknowledge that they have rights and so does everyone else in this world. They are prepared to compromise and seek win/win outcomes, where I win and you win. Unless we adopt these basic principles, we will not be seen as assertive by others, no matter how adept we are at using our skills. Instead we will be viewed by others as phoney, and the skills will appear as a set of 'tricks'.

Verbal communication

If, as Mehrabian argues, words only account for 7%, need we bother about them? The answer of course is yes. The point about Mehrabian's research is really that words only have real power when they are matched by a congruent body language and voice tone. If there is a mis-match between body language and the words, we tend to believe what we see before we believe what we hear. The same is true of voice tone. Unless the tone of voice matches the words we use, others may distrust what you say. To avoid being misunderstood we need to be sincere and speak truthfully. Only then will the words carry conviction.

The language we use does play a part in communicating whether we are behaving assertively or not. Certain phrases like 'you must', 'you have to', 'you should' can sound aggressive to the recipient since they appear to deny them choice. The same is true of phrases such as 'I can't' which can sound passive. Assertive people prefer the use of phrases such as 'I chose to' instead of 'have to', or 'I don't want to' in place of 'I can't'.

Assertion also involves a set of communication skills. What follows is a flexible framework built around a set of principles. To be effective you need to make it your own by using your own words and making your own style work for you.

There are four key steps to follow when communicating assertively.

Firstly, It is important to listen actively to what is being said, and then to acknowledge what you have heard to show the other person that you both hear and understand them. If we fail to acknowledge, then we often find ourselves frustrated by a circular argument in which neither person appears to hear or understand the other.

Secondly, having acknowledged what the other person has just said, use a transition or linking word before going on to say what you wish to say. Linking words like 'however', 'even

so', 'nonetheless', 'nevertheless', 'alternatively', 'on the other hand', 'be that as it may' have the effect of allowing you to state your opinions or feelings after acknowledging theirs without discounting the other person's views or feelings. Avoid the word 'but' because it is a 'blocking word' which can the unfortunate effect of negating what you have just said in the previous sentence.

Next, say what you think, feel or believe and own your statement by using the word 'I'. It is important to state your views and beliefs and to identify any emotions or feelings associated with them. You can strengthen the convictions of your statement by using the pronoun 'I'. Owning your statements in this way lets the other person know that you take responsibility for the way you think and feel.

In many situations, the Royal 'we' and 'one' can sound like a 'cop out'. Although there are situation when the words 'we' and 'one' may be appropriate, they often suggest that you are failing to take ownership and responsibility for what you say.

Finally, state what you want to happen by expressing a clear outcome. This moves the conversation towards a positive outcome or solution and prevents the conversation from becoming bogged down in a circular argument. It indicates openly what your intentions are without denying that the other person may want something different. Although there are occasions, such as when part of a joint negotiating team, when it may be appropriate to use the word 'we', it is generally better to own your statements by using the word 'I'.

Broken record

If having worked through the four steps, you find that you cannot resolve the conversation, then try the 'broken record' or 'tape recorder' technique. Children are experts at this and often 'win' by wearing their parents down. To do this you repeat

the four key steps again making sure that you acknowledge the other person's thoughts and feeling at key step one at each cycle. It is important to vary your sentences by changing some of the words each time. If not you will sound like a parrot?

Workable Compromise

Finally we should be prepared to accept workable compromise. This means giving each person room to manoeuvre in order to work out a solution that will be amenable to all parties. It means each person giving up a bit of what they want in order to move from their position to a shared one. It really means looking for an alternative way forward.

Remember. There can be: your solution, my solution and our solution



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