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## ASSERTIVE, NOT AGGRESSIVE

**A**n effective communicator is assertive and sensitive without being aggressive. You must be assertive, especially when interacting with employees, to ensure the goal of the communication is attained. You need to be sensitive, but not aggressive, so the person you're communicating with – employee, golfer, family, friend – isn't placed on the defensive.

Assertive means presenting your feelings, positions or requests clearly and calmly. Sensitive means taking the time to understand another person's ideas, positions and feelings clearly. Sensitivity also means respecting those ideas and positions when you don't agree with them. Sensitivity means having empathy. Empathy is walking in another's shoes or mentally entering into the spirit or feeling of another person.

Let's look at a work problem: Two maintenance staff employees argue every week when the work schedule is posted. Each week, something like the following occurs:

**Superintendent:** "What's wrong with you guys?"

**First employee:** "He has a more favorable schedule."

**Second employee:** "No. You always favor him when scheduling."

**Superintendent:** There's no reason to argue. We're a team, so don't disagree. I don't want any arguing next week."

There's nothing incorrect about the superintendent's response, except that it's not solving the problem. In fact, the employee conflict is infecting the staff, who are complaining about work schedules, morale and declining productivity. A more empathic approach, in addition to asking questions, is:

**Superintendent:** "What's the problem here?"

**First employee:** "He has a more favorable schedule."

**Second employee:** "No. You always favor him when scheduling."

**Superintendent:** "Is the schedule really

the problem?"

**First employee** (sheepishly): "No, not really. We had a disagreement about a woman."

**Superintendent:** "Is fighting about the work schedule accomplishing anything?"

**First employee:** "Not really."

**Second employee:** "No."

**Superintendent:** "What do you think should happen with the schedule?"

**First employee:** "We need to solve our personal problem and keep it away from work."

**Second employee:** "I agree."

**Superintendent:** "Excellent."

Supervisors often think the second dialogue is an example of getting too involved in employees' lives. This is a legitimate concern, and it's a fine-line issue.

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To investigate this fine line further, remember your responsibility is to ensure those you supervise succeed. In the example above, showing empathy and revealing the real issue, even though it was personal, resolved a conflict that had become a barrier to employee and course success. The focus was employee performance. That it brought out personal issues was secondary.

Let's look at another situation in which a superintendent's involvement did little to resolve an issue. The dialogue below is with an employee who normally has excellent work habits but has been late three times in the last two weeks.

**Superintendent:** "Jim, how are you?"

**Employee:** "I'm so-so."

**Superintendent:** "I'm here because you've been late three times during the past two weeks. You've always had an excellent attendance record."

**Employee:** "Oh. I was hoping you wouldn't notice. I'm having car problems."

**Superintendent:** "Cars can be irritating."

**Employee:** "I'm really trying. I know it'll get better."

**Superintendent:** "I'm sure it will. "I know it's the little things that can drag you down, but I know you can do better."

The problem is that the superintendent, trying to show empathy, was sensitive, actually overly sympathetic, but wasn't assertive. No progress was made in solving the tardiness problem.

In the dialogue below the superintendent is empathic, sensitive and assertive to resolve the tardiness problem without becoming overly sympathetic to the employee's problem.

**Superintendent:** "Jim, How are you?"

**Employee:** "I'm so-so."

**Superintendent:** "I'm here because you've been late for work three times during the past two weeks. You've always had an excellent attendance record."

**Employee:** "Oh. I was hoping you wouldn't notice. I'm having car problems."

**Superintendent:** "Jim, you know the course policy on such issues. We will do what we can to help, but it's your responsibility to be at work and maintain outstanding work performance. I know cars can be frustrating. We feel like we have little control. Do you remember the company has an employee loan program? I also recall that a couple employees live in your direction."

**Employee:** "Those are good ideas. I guess I'm not thinking clearly. Thank you for the ideas. They'll help."

**Superintendent:** "I'm pleased I could help. I'll check with you in a week and expect you'll have been on time every day."

**Employee:** "That will work."

As you communicate with employees and others, focus on being assertive and sensitive without being aggressive. **GCI**