Abstract

The authors define the difference between assertiveness, non-assertiveness and aggression, and demonstrate how two people acting assertively can achieve a productive dialogue leading to results which satisfy both parties. Readers are shown how to meet aggression with assertiveness, and how to be assertive in such situations as negotiations and meetings, with people in senior positions, during change, under stress, and when discussing performance.

Reviewed by Ruth Tarplee

by Ken Back and Kate Back


ISBN: 0077114280

Introduction

The authors, who have been involved in assertiveness training for many years, have written this book for anyone who deals with other people at work. Whatever the size of the company or business it is possible to find yourself in difficult situations, such as unreasonable requests from managers, lack of cooperation from other departments, the need to transmit unpopular decisions, dealing with irate customers or making important presentations with insufficient preparation time. These situations, which arise when wants, needs and opinions differ, arouse discomfort, anxiety, anger and frustration, and can lead to open conflict. The authors stress: “The outcome of any situation can be very different according to
They proceed to explain how difficult situations can be handled to the satisfaction of all concerned using assertive but not aggressive behaviour. The emphasis is on the beliefs, thoughts and feelings that affect behaviour, and which the authors believe can be modified. They show how feelings can be controlled and assertive behaviour assumed in even the most difficult and frustrating situations. Numerous assessment tables and examples help readers to assess their own levels of behaviour and find ways to improve them.

Assertiveness, non-assertiveness and aggression

The first chapter deals with the differences exhibited by, and the effects achieved by, assertive, non-assertive and aggressive behaviour. When writing of behaviour the authors include manner of speech as well as actions. They make use of the word ‘assertion’ to cover assertive behaviour and ‘non-assertion’ to cover non-assertive behaviour. They give a dictionary definition of ‘assertion’ as either “an affirmation, a declaration, or a positive statement” or “insistence upon a right”.

Assertiveness is not to be confused with aggression and the authors explain that by assertion they mean standing up for your own rights without violating the rights or entitlements of others, and expressing your needs, wants, opinions, feelings and beliefs honestly and appropriately. Clear expression is likely to lead to needs being met and opinions being taken into account. The authors believe that assertive behaviour increases the likelihood of conflict being resolved to the benefit of all parties. It also increases self-confidence even if needs are not entirely met, and confidence in yourself helps you to have confidence in others. You recognise that you can control your own behaviour and take more initiatives. Less energy is expended on worrying about how to deal with situations and you will experience a reduction in stress and tension. The authors say that organisations where assertiveness prevails move away from command and control management and become flatter and less hierarchical. People take greater responsibility for their own personal development, formal structures are replaced by networks built up by the employees, teamwork increases in importance, and organisational values are clarified and attempts made to adhere to them.

People who are non-assertive fail to stand up for their own rights or do so only feebly. They express their needs, wants, opinions, feelings and beliefs in apologetic or self-effacing ways or fail to express them at all. Non-assertion is not to be confused with politeness; you can disagree politely. The authors say that the aims of non-assertion are to avoid conflict and please others. Non-assertive people tend to think that other people’s rights, needs and wants are more important than their own and that others have more to contribute. Being non-assertive, although it may make you feel better in the short term, can eventually result in you taking on more work than you can cope with, cause you loss of self-esteem, reduce your ability to deal with difficult situations and take initiatives, and lead to anger, frustration and psychosomatic problems such as backaches and headaches. Non-assertive behaviour has unfortunate effects on other people who may go from feeling sorry for you, to feeling guilty about taking advantage, to feeling irritation, to losing their respect for you and, finally, to avoiding you. The organisation may
also suffer, especially if there are a number of people acting non-assertively. Conflicts might not be handled to the satisfaction of all parties, difficult decisions might be avoided, problems could escalate, and there may be a reluctance to take initiatives.

Aggressive behaviour involves standing up for your own rights in a way which violates the rights of others. Aggressive people believe that their own rights, needs and wants are more important than those of others, and that they themselves have more to offer than others. The short-term effects of aggression may be pleasing and involve a dissipation of anger and tension, a sense of power, and the outward approbation of colleagues. Long-term effects are not so pleasing and may include feelings of guilt, shame or embarrassment, leading to profuse apologies and over-helpfulness. Alternatively others may be blamed, leading to hate and distrust, and problems with friendships and job prospects. Those against whom you show aggression may feel anger or humiliation and either retaliate or avoid you. A number of people behaving aggressively in an organisation may cause talented people to leave, and cause those who remain to take fewer initiatives and risks. With in-fighting between managers, customers are likely to suffer.

The second chapter helps readers to recognise the extent of their own assertiveness and detect aggressive tendencies, both verbal and non-verbal, by comparing their own behaviour to given examples and completing recognition exercises. Summaries are given of the three styles of behaviour. Assertive verbal behaviour includes brief and clear statements which quickly come to the point, distinction made between fact and opinion, avoidance of ‘should’ and ‘ought’ statements, constructive criticism without blame, questions to elicit the opinions of others, and suggestions for dealing with problems. Non-verbal assertiveness involves steady, firm, clear and sincere speech, with tone and volume in the middle range. Speech should be steady and even without hesitation and key words emphasised. Smiles and frowns should be in the appropriate places with steady and relaxed expression. Eye contact should be firm but not staring, hand movements should be open acting as an invitation, and posture should be relaxed or upright with the head held up. There is a list of the types of phrases to be avoided if assertiveness is not to become aggression, and it includes excessive use of the first person singular, boastfulness, opinions given as facts such as “That won’t work”, threatening questions such as “Why on earth did you do that?” and requests in the form of instructions, or even threats, like “That report has to be finished by tomorrow or else”.

**Assertiveness in practice**

Five situations are given where assertiveness may achieve results. After explaining how requests should not be made, the authors give hints regarding how they should be made. You should be direct, keep it short, give a reason for the request, and respect the other person’s right to say no, but avoid profuse apology, self-justification, trying to sell your request with flattery, and playing on people’s friendship or good nature.
Moving on to disagreeing and stating our views, we are told to state our disagreements very clearly, express doubts in a constructive way, use ‘I’ statements to distinguish opinion from fact, be prepared to change our opinion in the light of new information but not in response to emotional behaviour, be prepared to give reasons for our disagreement, be clear about what we agree with and what we do not agree with, and recognise the opinions of others.

The authors say that the interchange of ideas and resources at work make the giving of praise inevitable. If mistakes are pointed out then so must successes be praised and such praise informs others of your standards. Recommendations for giving praise include maintaining eye contact, keeping praise brief and clear, making sure that it is known that you are pleased with results, and specifying exactly what are the pleasing factors. Praise can also be received assertively with a simple and short response which accepts or agrees with the praise.

The advice for conveying bad news is given in greater detail than the other situations. It is much better to convey the bad news directly to other people before they find out from another source and thus reduce your opportunity to deal with the situation confidently and assertively. The topic is introduced with a reference to expectations and the specific bad news, only briefly including the background, reasons and actions that will be taken; more details can be given later. The delivery should be factual, clear and brief without being abrupt, and eye contact should be maintained. A willingness to hear suggestions should be expressed, but no promises made. The conveyor of the bad news might not agree with the action implicated and can tell this to the recipient of the bad news, but it must be communicated in a way that does not undermine the proposed changes, and only after making the position clear to the person who asked for the information to be conveyed.

**Negotiating assertively**

Assertive behaviour in negotiations helps in the achievement of outcomes leaving all parties satisfied. The authors clarify the difference between win/win and compromise outcomes. A win/win outcome leaves both parties feeling pleased in the knowledge that the decision will go a long way towards satisfying their needs. In a compromise both sides will feel that they have missed out and that the outcome is only a ‘second best’. The importance of the difference between needs and solutions is also made clear. Needs are the requirements that drive behaviour and solutions are ways of satisfying those needs. There may be a number of alternative solutions available to satisfy needs. If negotiators cannot agree, the best idea is to consider other solutions, rather than continue to argue about just one or two. Offering an alternative justifies an assertive rejection of the solution under discussion.

We need to make clear that we understand the needs of others and that we want to help them to meet their needs as well as satisfy our own. Our own needs must be fully explained. Positive assertions are better than negatives when responding to requests and this means stating what you can do rather than what you cannot do. If the phrase ‘win-win’ has become a bit of a cliché you can use phrases like:
“Can we find a way that will work for both of us?” In some circumstances, when dealing with a person who is senior to yourself, it might be advisable to acknowledge their right to make the final decision.

There will be situations in which you are not willing to negotiate and that is your right, although you must make sure that you will not be going against your contractual conditions in doing so. You do have a right to say no if you are asked to do something that is illegal or against organizational policy, if you are asked for confidential information, if you do not want to buy from a salesman, and if you are asked to participate in social events associated with work. It is best to give the real reason for refusing, acknowledge your decision and not blame it on others, and always be polite and concise. Persistence has to be heard but treated firmly without lapsing into aggression.

**Types of verbal assertiveness**

Six types of verbal assertiveness, called assertion in the book, are outlined:

- **Basic assertions** are the most commonly used consisting of a straightforward statement to defend one’s rights, needs, wants and opinions, for example: “I would like to make some changes to …”
- **Empathetic assertion** involves both stating one’s own needs and wants, and recognizing the feelings, needs and wants of the other person, for example: “I appreciate that you don’t like the new procedure, but …” Empathy is not the same as sympathy. Empathy implies understanding whereas sympathy implies feeling sorry for someone. Empathy can prevent aggression.
- **Discrepancy assertion** points out the difference between what has previously been agreed and what is now happening or about to happen. An example is: “As I understand it, we agreed that project A was top priority. Now you’re asking me to give more time to project B. I’d like to clarify which is now the priority.”
- **Negative feelings assertions** draw the attention of a person to the undesirable effect their behaviour is having on you. It can be used where a person ignores your rights when you have already raised an issue, and involves four stages: a description of the other’s behaviour, how that behaviour affects you, how you feel and what you want or prefer.
- **Consequence assertions** inform the other person of the future consequences if certain behaviour is continued and usually includes an ‘if’ clause. It is last-resort behaviour to be used sparingly when other types of assertion have failed, and only when you have sanctions which you can apply. In other cases a negative feeling assertion may be better.
- **Responsive assertions** involve finding out the needs, wants, opinions and feelings of others and may take the form of a question such as “What problems does that create for you?” or a statement such as “I'd like to hear your views about ….” It is used when you need to check that you are not violating the rights of others and is most likely to be used when the other person is non-assertive.
Handling negative feelings

The authors point out that, while productive feelings such as excitement, enthusiasm, confidence and concern lead to effective behaviour, negative feelings like anger, worry, frustration, guilt, jealousy, depression and inadequacy are unproductive and may prevent people from behaving as assertively as they would wish. They may behave aggressively or non-assertively. Our feelings are triggered by external situations and may be reinforced by habit, but can be controlled with sufficient effort. The authors go into some detail about thinking processes and reinforcement of faulty thinking processes.

The strategy recommended for dealing with unproductive feelings is to intervene in the thinking process. It has to be slowed down by means of an ‘inner dialogue’ or talking over your thinking process with yourself. This is obviously best done before a situation actually arises so that you are well prepared when it is necessary to deal with the situation. Things you might say and do need to be thought out and your assertive behaviour rehearsed, giving you a greater chance of actually behaving in that way. Of course you cannot guarantee that the other person will respond in the way you think or hope they will.

Handling aggression from others

Many people find dealing with aggression from others a difficult and emotionally draining experience. Other people’s aggression will, unless you are very careful, push you towards either a non-assertive response, which may lead you to give in too far to the other person’s demands, or it may push you to an aggressive response, perhaps in the form of a personal attack or in a hardening of your determination not to give way at all. Either way, the content of the discussion becomes lost in the conflict. The way of responding assertively to aggression from others is summarised: “The aim of handling other people’s aggression is to get the interaction on to an assertive-assertive level, so that issues are dealt with and you feel OK about the interaction afterwards. In addition, handling the aggression with assertion (i.e. assertive behaviour) reduces the chances of aggression recurring from that person in future.”

The first step in dealing with aggressiveness is crucial. The aim is to defuse the aggression in the other person. The authors suggest a brief pause to consider how to deal with the situation or in their words “get a sound inner dialogue going”. A deep breath and the use of starter words such as “well” or “OK” will also give you a few fractions of a second to think. Asking for further clarification in an assertive, but not aggressive, tone of voice is the next stage. Slow speech may encourage the other person to slow down too. You listen carefully to their next response without interruption, and if they relax as they unburden their feelings it may be possible to achieve an assertive-assertive exchange. If the aggression continues the third stage is your basic response to explain your position with relation to theirs. If aggression still continues the fourth stage is an increase of emphasis on your position. Stage five could be a negative feelings or a consequence assertion such as “I feel annoyed when you make statements like that” or “If you continue in this way, I won’t be able to continue negotiations.”
a sixth stage is reached with no reduction of aggression on the part of the other person you will either need to cut off the interaction or go away from the immediate issue to underlying problems or feelings which may be at the root of the aggression.

**Being assertive upwards**

Many people are reluctant to behave assertively towards people senior to themselves. This is the result of many years of command and control management whereby staff accepted management decisions and implemented them without question. The authors aim to show that people may behave more assertively upwards without being viewed as aggressive, negative or trouble makers. The first stage is to consider our beliefs about senior management.

Beliefs that are a barrier to being assertive upwards are:

- Management know best.
- They never care about problems, only about good news.
- They are not interested in our views.
- It is for them to think of these things, not me.
- They are all the same in senior positions.
- They will think I am trying to undermine their authority.

Beliefs that enable upward assertiveness are:

- Senior managers do not necessarily know best even with more knowledge, experience and expertise.
- They can be mistaken.
- They may not be the best judges of how things work best at my level.
- It is better to question and challenge than to regret later.
- We are all equal as human beings whatever our seniority.
- There is usually more to lose by keeping quiet.
- They manage, but my input is also essential.
- I can be respectful without being deferential.

These latter beliefs will spark off sound inner dialogues to enable assertive behaviour.

Fear of negative consequences, such as being ridiculed, getting a poor appraisal, failing to get a salary increase, being excluded from future meetings or projects, or even getting the sack, can lead to faulty inner dialogues and cause non-assertive or even aggressive behaviour. The authors say that the inner dialogue should be based on how assertive behaviour is conducted:

- I can give a contrary view if I do so sensitively.
- I need to understand the thinking behind the decision.
- As long as I like the principle I will not be seen as negative if I have reservations about the details.
- I am not questioning authority by seeing things differently.
I must express my views in a positive and sensitive way.

As assertive behaviour with senior members of an organization may be difficult it is suggested that we start gradually, perhaps in one-to-one situations rather than in a large meeting, and not with aggressive managers. The authors deal particularly with negotiations over excessive workloads, which may be tackled generally or when extra work is allocated and you already have as much as you can cope with efficiently. You need to think in terms of a winning situation for both yourself and your manager, and consider how you will express your rights. You do have a right to negotiate your workload, but you can do this in a positive way, and you can stress that you enjoy the work before proceeding to talk about being able to maintain high standards and balance work with home life. Before beginning it is necessary to be clear about what your workload has been and what is acceptable, and you must raise the issue at a suitable time.

Conclusion

This book could have its uses for any reader. Those who know that they lack assertiveness can follow its advice for becoming more assertive and even those who are satisfied with their assertive behaviour might benefit from the recognition exercises if only to ensure that they are not verging on the aggressive. The authors do use some commonly used words, such as assertion and hassles, in a more specific way than normal, but they define their use and this does not detract from the general comprehension of the substance. Apart from the topics already covered in this review there are chapters dealing specifically with giving and receiving criticism about performance, how you are influenced by the assertiveness, non-assertiveness and aggression of others, contributing assertively to meetings, assertiveness during times of change and assertiveness and stress.

A final chapter advises readers to continue to practise and prepare, and increase their assertiveness. It also suggests reviewing situations afterwards to gauge success and learn from failures. The final words are: “A lasting increase in your assertion (i.e. assertive behaviour) will come about only if you do keep practising and reviewing. This way, the assertive behaviours we have referred to in the book become an integrated part of you behaviour. Being realistic when you review your performance ensures that you recognize your successes and keep your failures in perspective. It may help you to understand some of these failures if you remember that some people may have a vested interest in your not becoming more assertive.”