

Aggressiveness vs. Assertiveness

Workshop 4

Louis sits down at the union meeting, eager to discuss a problem he and the other airline ticket agents have had. Since a change in flight schedules took effect, the agents have been overwhelmed with long lines of people checking in. The passengers have been getting upset, and the agents—Louis included—have grown frazzled and dissatisfied.

Drummond, the union representative, begins with routine matters. Louis gestures for attention, but Drummond calls on Juan instead.

“Lately,” says Juan, “we’ve been having some trouble handling the workload. The lines are getting too long. We’re issuing tickets and checking baggage as fast as we can, but the passengers are upset about it.”

“What’s the problem?” Drummond asks. “The number of passengers hasn’t increased, so why can’t you keep up?”

Now Louis chimes in. “If you’d pay more attention to what’s going on here, you’d know. The new schedules have more flights clumped together around one o’clock and three o’clock, so there are more passengers at those times.”

Drummond stiffens. “As your union representative, I do pay attention.”

“Look, Mr. Drummond,” says Juan, “we don’t mean to criticize

you. We’re just saying the work conditions have changed, and we’re unhappy about it. We feel that, as our representative, you could speak to management.”

“Tell those idiots they need to do something,” Louis adds.

Drummond frowns and mutters, “Management doesn’t respond well to griping.”

Louis sneers, “Whose side are you on?”

Juan hastens to explain, “Mr. Drummond, it’s in management’s interests to keep travelers happy. If a supervisor could help out

behind the counter at the busy times, it’d make a big difference for the passengers.”

“All right,” Drummond concedes. “I’ll see what I can do.”



What’s Inside

Here, you will learn to:

- ◆ distinguish between aggressive and assertive behavior
- ◆ develop the characteristics of assertiveness
- ◆ perceive aggressiveness in others

Assertive or Aggressive: What's the Difference?

In the scenario you've just read, Louis and Juan wanted to make the same point about their working conditions. Juan managed to get the point across effectively. Louis, however, succeeded only in irritating the union representative. Can you tell why Juan was so much more successful than Louis?

Defining the Terms

In our scenario, Louis's remarks were *aggressive*. That is, in conveying his own views and feelings, Louis said things that he knew might wound Drummond. He challenged the man's self-esteem by implying that Drummond was neglectful, foolish, and disloyal to his union members. Louis's tone was hostile and sneering. Not surprisingly, Drummond's reaction was negative.

What are the alternatives to aggressiveness? Being passive is one obvious alternative. Louis could have chosen not to speak up at all. In that case, however, he would have lost the opportunity to help himself and his coworkers resolve a significant problem. He would have forfeited his right to have a say in his own working conditions.

Juan's approach represents a better alternative. Juan's contributions were *assertive* rather than aggressive or passive. That is, Juan put forth his own ideas, expressed his feelings, and by implication conveyed his right to be taken seriously. Yet at the same time he showed respect for the rights and feelings of others, including Drummond.

Aggressiveness Without Words



In addition to our words, our nonverbal behaviors—gestures, postures, expressions, and tones—convey whether we are being aggressive, assertive, or passive. Aggressive people, for example, often do the following:

- ✓ Clench their fists.
- ✓ Point their fingers at others.
- ✓ Stand with hands on hips and feet apart.
- ✓ Narrow their eyes.
- ✓ Keep their mouths tight and eyes fixed, showing little expression.
- ✓ Raise their voices.

What nonverbal behaviors do you think would show assertiveness instead of aggressiveness? Read on in this workshop to find out.

Aggression as a Learned Response

Aggressiveness often appears when people feel they are being threatened in some way. For instance, if someone insults you, you may well respond with a similarly barbed remark—meeting aggression with aggression.

It may seem “natural” to use aggression for self-defense. Actually, though, psychologists disagree about whether aggressiveness is an innate characteristic of all humans. The experts also have different opinions about whether a tendency toward aggressiveness can be inherited from one’s parents.

Psychologists do agree, however, that specific patterns of aggressive behavior are not inherited. Rather, these patterns are learned. A man who reacts to criticism by shoving his critic in the chest probably learned that response in childhood—and never grew out of it. A woman known for sarcastic remarks in meetings may have learned early in life to protect herself with scornful words.

As these examples show, the behaviors we learn early in life are often not the best ones. But we can modify them. We can learn to defend our rights by asserting ourselves rather than by being aggressive.



? Did you know?

Workplace violence—an ultimate expression of aggression—is a growing concern. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics:

- ◆ Homicide is the third leading cause of death on the job. Among women, it is the *number one* cause of workplace death.
- ◆ Eighty-five percent of homicides are men and 15% are women.
- ◆ Overall, 18% of violent crimes are committed while a person is on work duty.

Much of the violence stems from interactions with the public (for instance, holdups at convenience stores) rather than from conflicts between coworkers. Still, in the wake of horrific news reports, there is more and more worry about disgruntled employees erupting into violence.

ACTIVITY 4.1

NAME _____

How Aggressive Am I?

Answer these questions as honestly as you can, using the following scale:

- 5 Very true of me
- 4 Often true of me
- 3 Occasionally true of me
- 2 Seldom true of me
- 1 Never true of me

- _____ 1. If people's ideas are stupid, I tell them so.
- _____ 2. When I disagree with people, I try to keep in mind that they have a right to disagree with me.
- _____ 3. No matter how much I dislike people, I try not to insult them.
- _____ 4. When people challenge me, I get sarcastic.
- _____ 5. If I need to attack someone personally to defend my rights, I'll do so.
- _____ 6. I try to respect a coworker's opinions, even if he or she has never been right in the past.
- _____ 7. When arguing for something I believe is right, I let the chips fall where they may.
- _____ 8. If a coworker says something really silly, I laugh in his or her face.
- _____ 9. If an argument gets personal and nasty, I try to stay out of it.
- _____ 10. I avoid using language that could undercut other people's images of themselves.
- _____ 11. I speak up fast when someone seems about to insult me.
- _____ 12. Knowing when to stay silent is a characteristic I admire.
- _____ 13. I'm always waiting for coworkers to mess up, so I can straighten them out.
- _____ 14. I'm known for giving everyone an opportunity to voice an opinion.

To calculate your total score for this exercise, first reverse the scores for items 2, 3, 6, 9, 10, 12, and 14. That is, if you wrote a 5 next to one of those items, make it a 1; if you wrote a 4, make it a 2. (A 3 stays the same.) Now add up all the numbers. The maximum score is 70. The higher your score, the more aggressive you tend to be. How do you think you might reduce your aggressiveness and learn to be assertive instead?

_____ **SCORE**

Characteristics of Assertive Behavior

Now that you understand what it means to be assertive rather than aggressive, how do you think assertive people normally express themselves? They do speak up; they are definitely not passive. But somehow they assert their opinions and their rights without causing offense.

Here are some specific techniques used by assertive people:

- ◆ Direct eye contact
- ◆ Posture that is firm and straight but not stiff
- ◆ Serious but not severe facial expressions
- ◆ Gestures that reinforce the message without threatening
- ◆ Objective (not judgmental) language
- ◆ Short, to-the-point sentences
- ◆ Honest statements of feelings and desires
- ◆ Frequent use of “I” messages (see Workshop 3)
- ◆ Voice that is steady and strong without being loud
- ◆ Willingness to listen to other people

How do you think interactions in your workplace would change if everyone were assertive rather than either aggressive or passive?



Do You Have a “Script” for Aggression?

Some psychologists believe that each of us creates a mental “script” for aggression. Like a movie script, it tells us what to say and do in provocative situations. We have learned it over the years—in effect, we have it memorized. And, all too often, as soon as the triggering circumstances pop up, we follow the script blindly, playing out our aggression even if the consequences are likely to be bad.

Luckily, because the script is learned, we can unlearn it if we make the effort. The first step is simple:

STOP AND THINK!

“
If you want to influence people, you will be welcomed much more if you have a gentle approach than if you are aggressive.”

— **RUTH BADER GINSBERG**
U.S. Supreme Court Justice

ACTIVITY 4.2

NAME _____

Practice Your Assertiveness

Imagine the following situation: Your team is working on a big project. The outcome will be important both for the company and for the team members, who stand to earn a lot of personal credit if the project succeeds. At the start of the work, you had what you knew was an excellent plan. But the team chose another direction, mostly because the team leader, Bruce, insisted on his own opinion while discounting yours. Now the team's in trouble, and you think you must come to the rescue by putting your own plan forward once again. At a team meeting, various people are sitting around, complaining about the lack of progress, though Bruce insists everything is okay. You clear your throat and begin to speak.

In the space below, sketch out what you will say. Include notes about your tone of voice, your gestures, and so on.

Perceiving Aggressiveness in Others

Earlier in this workshop, you learned that aggressiveness is often used as a defensive measure. If you think that someone has insulted you, for instance, you may tend to react aggressively.

But this raises the question of what we *perceive* as aggressive behavior. What if the other person had no idea that he or she was insulting you? Perhaps the other person didn't know you were sensitive on that particular matter. Or perhaps the other person was just a little thoughtless.

To avoid such misunderstandings, we need to be careful about interpreting other people's words and behavior. This is particularly true when differences of gender or culture are involved.

Gender Differences

In our culture, men tend to use both aggressive and assertive language more often than women do. This is part of the way our culture defines appropriate sex roles. When ordering lunch, a typical man might say, "Give me a hamburger, rare," while a woman might say, "I'd like a hamburger, and can you make it rare, please?" In a disagreement a man might say, "You're wrong," while a woman might say, "I think you're making a mistake in this case."

Of course there are many variations from these stereotypes. Yet the fact that we expect a certain style of language from men and a somewhat different style from women can lead us into misinterpretations.

Imagine that you're assigned to a work team with a new person you've never met before. In the opening discussion, you express an opinion, and the

newcomer contradicts you by saying, "No, that's wrong, it'll never work." If the newcomer is a man, you may accept that language as simply a brusque way of speaking. If those words are uttered by a woman, however, you may think she's overly aggressive and hostile—in which case, you're likely to respond defensively.



Cultural Differences

Different cultures tolerate different amounts of verbal aggressiveness and assertiveness.

For the most part, American culture values assertiveness. When we see someone politely but forcefully standing up for his or her opinion, we are likely to applaud. In fact, because our culture has so much respect for rugged individualism, we often tolerate some outright aggression if we think it's in a good cause.

In contrast, many East Asian cultures place much more value on cooperation and group spirit than on individualism. Consequently, they discourage the use of language that is confrontational. A recent immigrant from Japan may feel hurt by language you intended simply as direct and blunt.

Similar cultural variation occurs in feelings about personal space. In the United States, social distance—the amount

of space we consider comfortable for business meetings and impersonal social events—ranges from about 4 feet to about 12 feet. If someone consistently comes closer than that, he or she is entering our personal space, an area we prefer to reserve for friends, loved ones, and relatives. In most Asian cultures, however, people tend to give each other a greater amount of room, while in many Middle Eastern and Latin cultures the reverse is true. Thus, if someone from a “close-up” culture moves closer to argue a point with someone from a relatively “stand-offish” culture, the behavior may be interpreted as aggressive even if the words are merely assertive.

The main point is this: Whatever your gender or cultural background, you should pause before

interpreting someone's behavior as aggressive. Take a deep breath. Think it over. Squelch those defensive reactions unless they're truly needed.

Did you know?

Research suggests the following differences between male and female communication in the United States:

Men

More challenging
More direct
More authoritative
More competitive
More controlling

Women

More accommodating
More deferential
More collaborative
More cooperative
More supportive

Whether these qualities are actually typical of men and women is less important than the fact that we often assume them to be. Thus someone who behaves in a different way—a way that defies the stereotype—may often be misinterpreted.



GETTING CONNECTED

Many people become aggressive at times because they don't really know how to be assertive. Do you ever have trouble asserting yourself, or do you know others who do? For a measure of your assertiveness, try the test at:

<https://myqss.link/Assertiveness-Test>

Ask only for the free summary.

WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- Aggressive behavior promotes one's own opinions, feelings, or rights at the expense of other people's.
- Assertive people use techniques such as making direct eye contact, speaking in a strong (but not loud) voice, and stating their feelings honestly.
- Often we misinterpret the extent of another person's aggressiveness, especially when gender or cultural differences are involved.