

ASSERTIVENESS

People skills will be more important than ever in the 21st Century. Why? Because of a more diverse workplace. Because you'll have to market yourself more frequently to secure work. Because citizenship and leadership require people skills, and the 21st Century needs responsible citizens and capable leaders. One important people skill is the ability to communicate assertively in a variety of situations. It's a skill you as students can start using as freshmen: dealing with family, roommates, professors, and employers. Speaking up in class, getting dates, being active in organizations. Almost every day, you will have the chance to be more effective if you can assert yourself. What do we mean by "ASSERTIVENESS" (win-win) - as opposed to "AGGRESSIVENESS" (win-lose) or "PASSIVENESS" (lose-win)?

While assertiveness generally means standing up for yourself, one good way to clarify its meaning is to contrast it with aggressiveness on the one hand and passivity on the other. An aggressive person intimidates through anger and threat. A passive person acquiesces out of fear, shame, or guilt. An assertive person often wins, but without threats or intimidation. Because of this, relationships are often preserved.

When you have a CONFLICT with another person, studies show it is best to deal with it **assertively**.

There are, of course, other ways to assert yourself: speaking up in class or at a meeting, running for office, and standing up against injustice come to mind. I should also tell you that there are times when it's not necessarily best to be assertive. When a mugger has a gun pointed at you, it's probably a great time to be passive and comply with whatever he wants! I should also point out that being assertive doesn't always work. Some people are jerks and cooperation and compromise isn't in their repertoire. All I'm saying is that assertiveness is generally the best course of action in any situation that has conflict, and in our complex, crowded world, we do not lack for conflict.

THE ASSERTIVE FORMULA

There are many ways to communicate assertively. I'm going to provide you with a basic formula. Once you master it, you can assert yourself in other innovative ways. The formula consists of three components:

EMPATHY CONFLICT/DIFFICULTY ACTION

Let's take a look at each part.

When you start out with EMPATHY, you're demonstrating that you take the other person's perspective into consideration. By doing so, you create good will, which helps establish a positive environment for negotiation. Empathy may be defined as understanding another's point of view - and especially how they are **feeling** at the moment. Aggressive people often forget the empathy.

The next step is CONFLICT. You can't duck it if you're going to be assertive. Tell the other person just what it is that bugs **you** (not some 3rd party, **you**), what it is that you need, or what it is that you want to straighten out. Passive people find it difficult to bring up the conflict. And MOST IMPORTANT, the conflict must be stated as occurring between YOU and the miscreant - NOT the miscreant and some 3rd party. ("You're disturbing everyone on the hall by playing the music this loud." = no-no)

You conclude with the ACTION you want the other person to take. You've stated the other person's perspective/feelings and your own. Now, here's what you want to happen. Be straightforward and clear about it. The passive person frequently omits the action. The aggressive person may stress nothing else. The assertive person puts all three parts of the Assertive Formula together. And don't rule out COMPROMISE: it's OK to explore until you find a mutually acceptable course of action.

Now, let's put them all together - the person in the room next to yours is playing his/her stereo VERY loud:

I REALIZE THAT you're probably enjoying your music at that volume. (Empathy)

BUT I can't concentrate on studying for my quiz tomorrow with your playing your music that loud. (Conflict)

THEREFORE, please turn the volume WAY down or use earphones. (Action)

What are some conflict situations which could be addressed with ASSERTIVE STATEMENTS? . See if you can come up with statements that use all three components of the Assertive Formula.

EXERCISE

Once everyone understands the "assertive statement formula", everyone pairs off and practices. Use some of the situations in the Assertive Survey, or brainstorm a master list from which everyone can choose.