**Assertiveness (Part 1)**

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**Introduction**

The consistent and effective application of assertiveness leads to several long-term benefits, the most obvious of which is an increased ability to get what you want without angering or alienating others. When you get what you want, you will feel more satisfied. If you do that through cooperation, rather than hostile confrontation, you will build greater mutuality with others and more reciprocally beneficial relationships. Finally, as you feel more fulfilled in Once upon a time, assertiveness was all the rage. People took assertiveness training classes to help them stand up and speak out, borne of the conviction that by doing so, they would feel better about themselves and get more of what they wanted in life. Many achieved these goals, at least in part, because assertiveness, the honest expression of one’s feelings and desires, is an incredibly effective means of interpersonal interaction.

Sadly, however, there are few assertiveness training classes still in existence. Perhaps it was a passing fad, but if so, it’s one that we would be well to revive. In the service of that goal, I will try to illuminate this incredibly useful concept and demonstrate its application. Assertiveness is something that can be learned, and, with practice, effectively applied. The results can be immediate, powerful, and long-lasting.

yourself and more positively engaged with others, your self-esteem and general sense of well-being will improve.

These benefits can then build on each other over time, to the point where you may be living a much more satisfying life. As an additional benefit, you can model and teach the lessons you’ve learned to your children and to others around you, helping create a world of greater honesty, integrity, and authenticity.

**The Basic Idea**

Assertiveness is neither silent, seething passivity nor belligerent aggression. It is an effective interpersonal approach based on the expression of genuine feelings and desires. As a rule, this process elicits both respect and empathy from others, along with an increased likelihood of your desires being met. It is an approach especially useful in the presence of negative feelings, but it can be used at any time.

Fundamentally, assertiveness means saying what’s on your mind, clearly and directly. There is no tiptoeing around. You must access your feelings and desires, then state them honestly. You then must listen to the feelings and desires of the other. Having both people’s authentic wants and needs on the table allows for a real and effective dialogue to take place.

There are certain interpersonal issues that are practically synonymous with assertiveness. Boundary and limit setting, for example, are generally considered assertive acts, as are standing up for oneself and saying “no” when you really want to. Leading an effective life, rich in integrity and a sense of authenticity, requires you to be able to take these actions consistently and with care for the feelings of others.

There are exceptions to the positive outcome scenario, of course. There are times when no approach prevents an extreme emotional reaction from the recipient, but even then, and certainly as a rule, assertiveness is far more likely than other approaches to generate a positive reaction and to minimize negative ones.

**Passive, Aggressive, and Assertive**

Assertiveness differs fundamentally from three other approaches: passivity, aggression, and passive-aggression. Here are their fundamental characteristics, along with an illustrative example.

*Passivity,* an approach characterized by hyper-restraint and accommodation, is overtly fear-based. It focuses on the will or wants of others and ignores your own.

*Aggression,* in contrast to passivity, ignores the feelings of others and demands that they accommodate to you.

*Passive-aggression* combines the worst characteristics of both passivity and aggression. You first agree to the other’s requests, then feel resentful and find a way to punish the other for your acquiescence.

*Assertiveness* does not exist along the passive/aggressive continuum. It is not a “middle ground,” although there are those who describe it in that way. It is a fundamentally different approach that values the feelings of both parties.

One note: I am clearly in favor of an assertive approach, but not in all situations. Sometimes, it’s more useful to adopt one of the other approaches. For example, if a man comes up to you on a dark street, sticks a gun in your face and demands your money, it’s probably best to accommodate. The same might be true if your boss gives you a direct order in a stern voice and adds, “Do it now!” On the other hand, if you’re a heart surgeon in a complex operation, or the head of a project team with a deadline to meet, you may not have the time to discuss the situation. In such cases, you need to give direct orders and have them followed immediately. The key to making the best choice is flexibility and awareness of the needs of the ongoing situation.

**The Assertive Attitude**

While the approach to dealing with others can be learned, it rests on a basic attitude of self-respect and a sense that you are entitled to be treated with respect and dignity by others. As such, you have basic rights as a person.

* You have the right to your feelings, whatever they are. You may not always act on them, but they always matter. They’re telling you something important. Pay attention to them.
* You have the right to your thoughts and opinions, even if they disagree with others, including those in authority.
* You have the right to put your own feelings, desires, and needs first.
* You have the right to ask for what you want.
* You have the right to say, “No”.
* You have the right to your own limits and boundaries. You have the right to say “Enough.”
* You have the right to say, “I don’t know”.
* You have the right to say, “I don’t care”.
* You have the right to make mistakes (and you will.)
* You have the right to change your mind. It’s not always best (or necessary) to stick with the original plan.
* You have the right to ask for changes to be made.
* You have the right to follow your own counsel and ignore the advice of others.
* You have the right to live your life the way you choose, without justifying, defending, or even explaining your decisions to others.
* You have the right to refuse to apologize, unless you genuinely believe you’ve done something that merits an apology.
* You have the right to refuse responsibility for other people’s problems.
* You have the right to refuse to answer questions. Just because someone asks you something, doesn’t mean you have to answer.
* You are not required to read minds. If others want something from you, they need to ask.

From all of these flows an assertive approach to interactions with others.

**Obstacles to assertiveness and how to overcome them**

Although you may want to be more assertive and even be ready to try, there will be emotional issues that can make its application difficult.

*Getting started*. Just doing it can seem intimidating. This is a process you haven’t done in the past, so you’re probably going to feel some anxiety about it. That’s natural. There is no reason you should feel confident about doing something for the first few times. In this case, what I’ve found most helpful is to admit that I’m anxious, both to myself and to the other person. I might announce, “I’m feeling nervous saying this to you, because I’m not sure how you’ll respond, so it would mean a lot to me if you would hear me out, while I fumble my way through what I have to say.” If you have a reasonably cooperative partner, that shouldn’t be a problem. If you don’t, you will have to take alternative action (see below.)

*Fear of confrontation*. Many of us are afraid that if we assertively express our feelings and desires, we will be confronted aggressively. While that may happen no matter what the communication style, an assertive approach reduces that possibility. The initial empathic understanding tends to disarm confrontation by making the other feel understood, while the expression of feelings allows you to be vulnerable and honest, two qualities that pull for compassion, rather than confrontation, from others.

Having said that, it is sometimes impossible to avoid confrontation. You have to ask yourself, then, why do you fear confrontation? While it may not be pleasant, it must be tolerated from time to time in life. In addition, you probably have little to lose, even if the confrontation doesn’t go well. You weren’t getting what you wanted to begin with, and you were stewing in resentment, so even an ineffective confrontation may be better than bitter, sullen, and impotent silence. On top of that, often after a cooling-down period, the other comes back to you with a more cooperative attitude. The act of confrontation, though it did not work in the moment, set the stage for more constructive dialogue later by getting your feelings out on the table and demonstrating your willingness and ability to fight for what you want.

*Fear of rejection*. Many people fear that assertive communication automatically leads to rejection. While this is almost never the case, the fear persists, especially for those who grew up with parents who utilized harsh, punitive, and authoritarian childrearing practices. It is useful to remember that as an adult, you are not likely to be told off, abandoned, or immediately dropped. Your friends and lovers are not your parents, even if their personalities bear some resemblance to those of your original caregivers.

*Fear of being selfish*. Many of us have rigid rules we developed in childhood that tend to have the force of commandments. One of them is to put the needs of others before our own. When we put our own needs first, we can experience ourselves as selfish, self-centered, and bad. What’s more, we are often afraid that everyone else can see how selfish we are, and as a result, we will not be welcome anywhere anymore. Of course, this is not true, although as with the fear of rejection generally, the fear of being and appearing selfish – and therefore unacceptable – is often quite deep-rooted.

*Fear of doing it badly.* Often it can be difficult getting your thoughts and feelings together, especially under the pressure of an emotionally fraught situation. Moreover, sorting out the problem can be tricky, because the real issues can be hidden or complex. However, assertiveness is a skill that can be learned over time, and it will be mastered best by trying and (sometimes) failing, rather than by holding back until you think you have it down pat. By the way, you generally get points for trying, particularly if you’re with someone who cares about you.

*Fear of getting negative responses.* Vulnerability supports vulnerability. Assertiveness follows assertiveness. That is, you can address the response with the same vulnerability and assertiveness you used to address the original problem. So, if your partner responds in a consistently negative way, you can use assertiveness to let her know how difficult it is for you to keep trying in the face of her blanket rejection.

**Tips and Specific Situations**

Assertiveness is useful in a variety of settings. Here in Part 1, I will take up some relatively simple situations and illuminate the difference between an assertive approach and others (passive, aggressive, and passive-aggressive.)

*Going Slowly and Stopping to Think*

This is a general tip. One of the most problematic aspects of attempting to utilize an assertive approach is the pressure you may be feeling in those circumstances, along with the speed at which the conversation seems to be moving. It can seem sometimes as if the house is on fire. Fortunately, unless the house really is on fire, there are some simple tips to help you slow things down. The first step is to recognize that you’re under pressure. Use that awareness to say to yourself, “Stop.” Then say it out loud to the other. Ask for time to think. Deliberately slow down your breathing and your speech, even if the other person is talking fast and trying to pressure you. Remember, you don’t have to do it the way the other person wants; you have the right to go at your own pace.

*Asking for what you want*

You’re planning a date, and you want to go to the movies. If you’re passive, you will ask your date, “What would you like to see?” and you’ll see it, even if it’s not what you want to see. If you’re aggressive, you’ll say, “Get ready. We’re going to see the new *Star Wars* flick,” and you’ll drag her there, even if it’s not what she wants to see. If you’re assertive, you’ll say, “I’d love to see the new *Star Wars* film at the ArcLight. How does that sound to you? If she like the idea, you’ll go. If she wants something else, the two of you can negotiate.

*Responding to requests*

A friend calls you up and asks you to go to a party with him. You don’t want to go. If you’re passive and accommodating, you won’t know how to say no, and you’ll wind up going when you really don’t want to. If you’re aggressive, you’ll say, “No, wouldn’t go that crappy party if they paid me.” The assertive approach is to say, simply, “No, thanks, but thanks for asking.” You don’t need to explain or justify.

But what if your friend is not taking “no” for an answer. He says, “But it’ll be fun,” or “They’re having a great DJ,” or “You never want to do anything anymore.” You simply reply, “Hey, thanks for the offer. I can see how much you want me to go with you, but I don’t want to go. I’ll see you another time.” If the friend persists, you simply repeat that you don’t want to go or add, “That’s my decision, and it isn’t going to change.” Sometimes you can simply repeat a phrase such as, “Thanks for the offer, but the answer is still no.”

*Apologies*

There are many times in life when someone will become angry with you after an experience in which that person believes you have done something hurtful or injurious. He or she may demand an apology. In this case, I recommend separating the accusation into two parts. The first part is an acknowledgement that whatever you did hurt the other person. For that, I always apologize or express regret, but without acknowledging that what I did was a bad thing.

As an analogy, imagine you and your partner are learning to dance together, and you step on her toe. She screams with pain, then turns to you and says, “You oaf!” I would of course feel bad, because I stepped on her foot, and that caused her pain. However, I don’t necessarily believe what I did was bad, because I don’t know if it was my foot that was in the wrong place or at the wrong time. It might have been hers. It might have been both of ours.

So, before I apologize for the thing itself, I want to investigate the situation. I ask a lot of probing questions to determine who pushed whose buttons. I might ask, “What was it about what I said or did that bothered you so much?” And “Why does that bother you? I get it that it triggered you, but do you believe it’s a bad thing?”

If I ultimately determine that it was my error, I will certainly apologize. In fact, I will make a point of acknowledging the specifics of my error, so the other person sees that I get it. I will say something like, “Yes, I was 20 minutes late and kept you waiting. Or, “You know, I can be kind of selfish sometimes.” However, if I determine that I am not in the wrong, I don’t apologize. I don’t believe in saying “I’m sorry” for something I really am not.

*End of Part I*

In part 2, I’ll lay out my complete Assertiveness Formula and illuminate its application to limit and boundary setting.