**Assertiveness (Part 2):**

**Boundary Setting and the Assertiveness Formula**

Dr. Michael Pariser

2018

In Part I, I discussed a general approach to assertiveness, an attitude that informs everyday situations. Often, to function well and have your needs and desires met, it is sufficient simply to let others know how you feel, what you like or want. At other times, however, more pointed action is necessary to achieve your goals or prevent unwanted overreaching by others. You may feel threatened and need to stand up for yourself. Your limits may be tested, so you will want to establish and maintain firm and reliable boundaries. In other words, you will want to say “No,” and have it stick.

Here’s some good news. Unlike much in life, where you might want a formula but there isn’t one, the assertive approach has a simple and usable formula that you can practice and learn. Books on assertiveness generally lay out this process in three or four steps, but I’ve elaborated it to six, because I believe it to be more understandable and effective in this form. In addition, my first step (empathic understanding,) which is critically important, is not usually considered part of assertiveness proper.

The six steps in the assertiveness approach are phrases, that when strung together, form a message conveying your understanding of the situation, the problem you’re trying to address, your thoughts and feelings, how you would like to see things changed, and finally, if necessary, the consequences of the failure to change. Here is the message, broken down into its steps:

1. Empathy: “I understand that you feel/want/think/ believe\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”
2. Experience: “However, when I see/hear you say/do\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,”
3. Emotion: “I feel \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,”
4. Ideation: “…because I think\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”
5. Alternative: “So, I would like you to do\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ instead.”
6. Escalation: “…and if you don’t, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_is likely to happen, or I will personally will do\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

I’m going to pull that sentence apart and provide some examples, but first I need to lay out the prerequisites. The first is that you need to know what you feel, and while that process can be complicated, there is an approach I like that can help simplify it: I focus on my body. That is, I put my attention on the sensations in my body, and once I’m in touch with those feelings, I try to translate them into emotion words. For instance, if I have a sense of heaviness in my heart, I know I’m sad. By contrast, if my heart wants to jump out of my chest, I’m feeling lightness and joy. Tightness in my shoulders and chest, along with a churning in my guts, tells me I’m anxious or scared. When my jaw is clenched, and my hands want to ball into fists, I’m angry. And so on. Get to know your body and the way it expresses your different emotions.

After knowing how you feel, the second prerequisite to assertiveness is knowing what you want to have changed. It could be that you want the other person to do X instead of Y, or that you are happy if the other does A, B, or C instead of Y. It could be that you simply want Y to stop. In any case, knowing that ahead of time allows you to be clear when in dialogue later.

So let’s go on to the details of the formula itself.

1. I understand that you feel/want/think/believe\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Here, you are conveying an empathic understanding of your partner’s position. Empathy is defined as a “feeling into” the emotional state of another, a kind of “standing in the shoes” of another person; and while it is impossible to completely take off your own shoes (step out of your own perspective,) if you try hard enough, you can generally understand and identify your partner’s point of view. If need be, ask questions. You can also ask yourself what the closest experience is that you’ve had to the one your partner is claiming.

Once you’ve made that assessment, describe it for the other person. Make that description concise and to the point. Don’t belabor it, just be as clear as you possibly can, and be willing to hear corrections from your partner. It’s OK. It’s that person’s position, so let her or him have the final word. Just arrive at agreement about what the other person feels and move on.

By the way, expressing empathy for your partner’s position has several positive effects. It lets others know you truly get their point of view, so that they feel understood. Feeling gotten, in turn, allows them to relax, let their guard down, and not have to keep explaining themselves, and they can both pay attention to what you’re saying and proffer you the same respect you afforded them. It generally makes others *want* to hear what you have to say.

1. However, when I experience you say/do\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

In this step, you are describing what you see, hear, and/or experience in some concrete way. Your experience here must be as objective as possible, a visible or audible phenomenon, not an interpretation of that phenomenon. For example, you might say, “When you said that I never remember to take out the garbage” rather than, “When you ripped me a new one for not taking out the garbage.” The first is a factual description, while the second is a (biased) interpretation of the interaction. In the words of Sgt. Joe Friday, “Just the facts.” You will get a chance for interpretation two steps from now.

1. I feel \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Here you are expressing your emotional reaction to the interaction. Use I-statements and feeling words. Ground your experience in your bodily sensations. As an example, “I feel hurt and angry; my stomach is all in a knot.” Or, “I feel like my heart is heavy right now.”

1. …because I think\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Here is your opportunity to make all the interpretations and express all the opinions you want. They don’t have to be true, in any kind of objective sense, they just need to be honest. If your partner’s actions left you feeling scared and angry because you believe she is planning to leave you, say so. Your thoughts would express your best possible understanding of the situation, even if it is one-sided. “When you talked to Fred all night at the party, I felt hurt, because it made me think he’s more important to you than I am.” “Boss, when you yelled at me in front of my co-workers, it really upset me, because I think you don’t value my contributions as an employee, and you believe it’s OK to publicly shame me.”

1. So, I would like you to do\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ instead.

Here is where you describe your preferred alternative behavior on the part of the other. You can be specific (“I want you to do X”,) you can present a menu (“I’m OK if you do X, Y, or Z”,) or you could simply express that you want the original behavior stopped (“…just so long as you don’t keep doing what you’ve been doing.”)

1. And if you don’t, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ will happen.

These will be the consequences for the other’s failure to make the change for which you’re asking. They can be either environmental or proactive. Environmental consequences are those that will occur without further action on your part, while proactive consequences are the actions you will take deliberately. An example of an environmental consequence is this: “If you don’t pay the electric bill very soon, we’ll both be sitting in the dark.” A proactive consequence might be: “If you don’t start paying the electric bills on time, and we keep losing power, I will move out.”

Three important notes about escalating to the level of consequences. The first is that whatever you announce as the result of your partner’s failure must be realistic and achievable. If you tell your teenager that if he doesn’t do his math homework, you will put him up for adoption, that’s not a credible threat, and he is likely to ignore it.

Second, the consequences should, reasonably closely, match the issue at hand. You’re probably not going to break up with your girlfriend because she overcooked the chicken, although you might decide to do the cooking yourself.

Third, and probably most important, *you must carry out the penalty if your conditions are not met*, otherwise you will lose credibility, and your entire assertive project will backfire on you. In fact, failing to take the action you stated will make you look weaker and wimpier than you did before and render any future attempts at assertiveness exponentially more difficult.

One final note about escalating the conversation to the level of consequences. It can be done as a separate part of the conversation and added later if necessary. There is no need to threaten someone who is already willing to give you what you want.

**Obstacles to assertiveness**

Although the formula I’ve laid out is embarrassingly simple in theory, in practice, there will be emotional issues that make its application significantly more difficult. Obstacles to assertive communication in general can include:

*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 seen as 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.

**Examples**

How is this formula applied? Let me give you some examples to demonstrate. The first is a relatively straightforward (but painful) example.

*Example 1*

A friend calls you up and asks you to go to a party with him. You don’t want to go. You say, “No, thanks,” but 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 (empathy,) but I don’t want to go (feeling/desire). I’ll see you another time.” If the friend persists, you simply repeat that you don’t want to go or add, “I’m starting to feel annoyed (feeling,) because you don’t respect my decision (ideation.)”

*Example 2*

A more intense situation. Steve works for a company that utilizes an open-plan office. As a result, there is very little privacy. Steve is a reasonably conscientious worker, but he is not perfect. From time to time, he turns in work later than his boss, Tony, would like. One day, after Steve submitted a report three days late, Tony hit the roof. He burst out of his office, found Steve, and chewed him out in front of everyone. All work stopped, and every head turned to watch Tony rip Steve a new one and stalk off, leaving Steve drenched in shame and humiliation. What can Steve do now?

If Steve is passive, he will sit and stew in his shame and resentment. If he is aggressive, he will march into his boss’s office and yell back or quit. But if Steve is assertive, he might make an appointment to see Tony and say to him, “Tony, I know you were angry with me about the report being late, and you were right get pissed off. I haven’t had my reports in on time in a consistent way in a long time (empathy). However, when you screamed at me in front of my colleagues (experience,) I felt hurt and humiliated (emotion,) because I got the strong sense that you don’t value the work I do and because you think it’s OK to humiliate me in front of others (ideation.) So, in the future, I will make sure my work is done on time, and I would ask you, if you have a problem with me or my work, to address it with me privately (alternative.) [Then, if necessary: And if you do that again, I will seriously consider looking elsewhere for employment (consequences.)]

*Example 3*

This example is a little more complex, because it involves two different problems, one obvious, the other more implicit. A patient of mine, in this case a woman, has a 3-year-old child who is extremely allergic to nuts of any kind, which can send the boy into anaphylactic shock and possibly death. She and her husband have agreed always to keep nuts away from the boy’s grasp. One way they do that is that they only prepare dishes with nuts after the boy is asleep.

One day, however, my patient noticed her husband chopping nuts while her son was playing nearby. She was shocked, but being, as a rule, passive, she said nothing. Sorting through her feelings, we discovered two different issues, each with its own set of feelings. The first was that her husband was chopping nuts near her son, and the boy might get hold of some of them. Her emotion was fear for the health and safety of her child. The second issue was that she and her husband had an agreement (not to cook with nuts before her son went to bed,) which her husband had unilaterally violated.

In this case, I helped her structure the intervention by having her say to her husband, “I know you wanted to make us the most delicious meal you could, and I’m sure you thought that the nuts were out of our son’s reach (empathy.) However, when I saw you chopping them (experience,) I got really frightened (emotion,) because I imagined some pieces falling on the floor and him getting them (ideation.) I wish you wouldn’t do that again (alternative.) More importantly, we had an agreement, and I’m angry (emotion,) because your chopping the nuts left me thinking that you believe it’s OK to change our agreements unilaterally (ideation.) In the future, I would very much like you to discuss any changes with me before doing something we agreed not to do (alternative.)

In this case, her husband immediately recognized the validity of her position, agreed with her wholeheartedly, and resolved, in the future, to do as she had asked, so there was no need for her laying out consequences. Had he not gone along so easily, however, she might have added, “If you go back on your word again, it will be difficult for me to trust you in the future.” Depending on the relationship, she might have threatened even direr consequences.

*Example 4*

Sometimes you just can’t avoid stating the consequences. This example is from my own life.

I was in a relationship with a woman I loved, but at one point she seemed to have lost interest in me sexually. I didn’t know why. I tried every way I knew to seduce, cajole, flatter, excite, all to no avail. I asked her what the problem was, and she said she just wasn’t in the mood any more. What’s a poor guy to do? So I tried the assertive approach. I sat her down and said, “Darling, I understand that you may have important physical and emotional reasons for withdrawing from me, but when you do so continually and without explanation, I feel hurt and resentful, because I think you have fallen out of love for me or maybe have fallen for someone else. I hope you can bring yourself back to where we can be together again soon.” Now, I expected that to work, but it didn’t, so a day or so later, I escalated. I told her, “Baby, in the next couple of days, I’m going to have sex with a very beautiful woman. I hope that woman is you.”

It was.