

ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The power of confident, effective and assertive communication



VIEWER'S GUIDE

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*Get rid of the passive, eradicate the aggressive—
THRIVE with the assertive!*



INTRODUCTION: CHANGING YOUR COMMUNICATION HABITS

How many times have you communicated with a friend, spouse, child or team member, sharing detailed instructions of what you want or need? You ask the famous question, "Do you understand?" And they always respond with, "Yes!" Then a couple weeks later you figure out that they did NOT understand.

In today's society, communication gets even more complicated when you factor in the many roadblocks that prevent effective communication. In the workplace today, you may be working with four or five different generations, four different personalities, two genders and a variety of cultural differences. And on top of that, add stress, personal issues and what seems to be an increasing epidemic—a lack of emotional intelligence. It's no wonder that communication today often ends up as an emotional battleground.

During this training, you will gain a better understanding of how emotions affect communication; discuss the three "V's" of communication; define and review assertive, passive, passive-aggressive and aggressive communication styles; talk about the NOT-so-common communication styles; and learn several assertive techniques so you are able to stay calm and on track while still being able to get your points across.

On a daily basis people attend my communication seminars, bringing with them those bad communication habits that are clearly not serving them well. And even though they aren't getting the results they want or need, they keep doing the same things!

Why? Habit! Habits are easy to fall back on, even the bad ones. So it stands to reason that we first have to talk about habits. A habit, by definition, is an action or behavior you do repetitively without thinking. Just this morning, you executed a habit ... brushing your teeth. My guess is that you did not stand there with

brush in hand and say to yourself, "Now, how do I do this?" Most of you brushed your teeth AND did two or three other things at the same time. Habit—the ability to perform an activity or behavior without thought.

Changing a habit, on the other hand, requires extensive thought!

Changing your communication habits is the subject matter for this training. This will require you to think about what you currently do, why you do it, what your desired results are and if you are actually achieving those desired results.

When it comes to being a confident, effective and assertive communicator, you may have habits that are simply not serving you well. And in order to change those habits, you have to ask yourself, "What are the potential consequences if I don't update, change or improve my communication skills?"

The answer?

You could lose the respect of your co-workers.

You could lose the respect of your boss.

You could be passed over for bonuses, promotions or raises.

And worse yet, you could be fired.

Here are three simple steps for you to follow ...

1. Be willing to acknowledge what the potential consequences are to you
2. Be willing to acknowledge the areas where you do have bad communication habits
3. Commit to learning and implementing new skills and techniques to change those habits

Over the years, I've heard or read countless materials on assertive communication. And most of the time the training addresses the person who is delivering the message ... how the speaker needs to change their approach, their body language, their words and their tone. It has often appeared to me that the speaker is held responsible for a much higher percentage of the success of an assertive message.

However—the time has come to place some of this communication responsibility on the message recipient. Being a great communicator is not just about delivering words. One of the most effective communication skills is LISTENING. No ... I mean really listening! Listening to what is actually being said.

By thinking and listening more assertively, you will become better at:

- Hearing people out without interrupting
- Staying unemotional in stressful or conflict situations
- Not taking messages or behaviors personally

Our ultimate goal is to behave and communicate in an assertive manner as often as possible to achieve our desired results. As we prepare to explore communication styles in depth, we must first talk about emotions and how they can drive our responses. This leads us to the study of emotional intelligence.

Interest in emotional intelligence has grown significantly since the 1990s, with research suggesting that good emotional understanding can lead to increased social effectiveness and actually increase your success in your career. Statistics even suggest that having a high EIQ (or Emotional Intelligence Quotient) can provide you with greater career credibility and success than having a high IQ (or intelligence). And unlike IQ, you can improve your EIQ with some effort. Based on this research, learning emotional intelligence is a mandatory requirement for success.

Emotional intelligence includes three things:

1. Self-awareness
2. Self-management
3. Social awareness

Conflict

Conflict is very much like a splinter in your hand. While it is true that occasionally a splinter will work itself out, we all know that most of the time, if left unattended, a splinter will fester or get infected. In turn, that small, insignificant splinter turns into a much bigger problem than it really needed to be.

Conflict is the same way. While some conflicts will work themselves out if left alone, the reality is that if left unattended, most conflicts will fester and turn into mountains. Before you know it, you are not only avoiding the conflict, but also the person, department, boss, spouse or friend that you have the conflict with. I've seen perfectly good relationships severed simply because one or both parties could not assertively address the conflict.

It's the perceived confrontation that we dislike. In order to change that fear, we have to focus on self-esteem, self-confidence, personal power and assertive communication.



MODULE 1: THREE "V's" OF COMMUNICATION

There are numerous discussions, opinions, findings and documented

research studies on the topic of verbal and nonverbal communications. Probably the most widely cited research was conducted and published by Dr. Albert Mehrabian in his book entitled *Silent Messages*.

As a result of his research, he determined that the verbal and nonverbal communication model could actually be broken into what he called the three "V's" of communication: Verbal, Vocal and Visual.

In his model ...

- **Verbal** communication represents your words
- **Vocal** communication refers to your tone of voice. Tone is made up of four parts: Volume, pitch, speed and vocal inflection (or the opposite of monotone).
- **Visual** communication refers to anything that someone can see as they watch you communicate, more commonly known as body language

His research concluded that, in a mixed message, 7% of the recipient's belief of your message is based on the verbal, 38% of their belief is based on the vocal and 55% of their belief is based on the visual.

These findings support that famous old saying, "It's not what you say; it's HOW you say it."

In fact, it's 38% "how" you say it. Any time you have a mixed message, the recipient will believe your vocal tone before they believe your words.

These percentages apply to communications that take place person to person. But what happens when the communication is over the phone or in a written format?

In the case of phone communication, there is no visual interpretation, which leaves the vocal interpretation as the majority. Now, if there's a mixed message, the recipient's belief is based completely on vocal or tone of voice over your words. Not only does the vocal tone become very important, you have to keep in mind that telephones can actually amplify your voice. So if your voice takes on a certain tone, the amplification will make it even more noticeable.

Good phone skills training always includes one basic rule—when speaking on the phone, keep a smile on your face. Try it. You'll find your tone stays neutral or positive. It's pretty hard to have a negative tone when you're smiling! In fact, put a mirror up where you talk on the phone so you can see yourself—make sure you're smiling.

In the case of written communication like texting, e-mails, memos or formal letters, people often think that the visual and vocal percentages disappear. Actually that's not true. The reality is that in written communication, the author's vocal tone is nonexistent; however, the recipient is left to insert their own vocal tone any way they choose. This can be a risky thing to leave up to a recipient when you're discussing crucial topics. This is why you never ever, ever want to try to resolve conflict by e-mail. Do you really want to make your point with only 7% of your communication power—your words? Probably not.

There is another aspect of the three "V's" that is worth discussing. We've all heard the statement "people form their opinion of you in the first seven seconds after meeting you." Given the fact that you can't speak too many words in seven seconds, which of the three "V's" do you think first impressions are made on? Visual is the correct answer!

There are some people who will tell me, "Oh, I don't judge people based on how they look." Congratulations—you're the one in a million who doesn't! Studies show that people most certainly do make assumptions based on what they see. They'll determine your socioeconomic position, your level of education, your dedication to your job ... even if you're lazy, professional, mad, happy or serious.

Color Psychology

While we could discuss the positive and negative attributes of every color, let me provide you with a big-picture overview that will help you get started.

Dark colors are power colors



Black, chocolate brown, navy blue, charcoal gray—any dark shade. These colors evoke power, confidence and authority. The traditional men's power suit incorporated a dark suit, crisp white shirt and red tie of some kind. The dark suit speaks authority and confidence, the crisp white shirt speaks purity of thought and intention, and the red tie evokes the highest emotional response of what you put it with ... so with the power suit, it evokes passionate power.

Bright colors are stimulating colors



Hot pink, turquoise, lime green, neon orange, bright yellow. These colors stimulate the cortex of the person looking at them. So if you are wearing bright colors, the person you are speaking to can walk away feeling that YOU have been stimulating.

Pastels are nurturing or counseling colors



Softer pinks, greens, yellows and baby blue. Pastels make people feel safe and comfortable. Think about where you see these colors—counselors' offices, baby nurseries, hospitals.

Neutral colors are colors of class and sophistication



Cream, winter white, beige, taupe, tan, pearls, gold. These colors can say that you are organized and sophisticated. Pure white does not fall into this category, only winter whites.

All colors can influence the way people view you or how they feel around you. You can use color to change a first impression. If you are typically perceived as a wallflower, you could add dark and bright colors to your wardrobe to change that message. If you are often perceived as overbearing or loud, try adding pastels and see if you get a different reaction.



MODULE 2: AGGRESSIVE VS. PASSIVE

There are several different communication styles that people use in dealing with

others or to express their emotions. The most widely known styles are:

- **Passive**
- **Assertive**
- **Aggressive**
- **Passive-Aggressive**

So how do you know if you're crossing over a passive or aggressive line? To find out the answer to that question, we will need to define each of the communication styles and take a look at some examples of each of them. Let's begin with our desired style—assertive communication.

Assertive Communication

The definition of assertive communication is:

Standing up for your rights, without undue anxiety and without infringing on the rights of others.

Assertive communicators know how to set boundaries.

They can stand up for their rights without having sweaty palms or an anxiety attack, losing sleep or showing up and blowing up on people.

And they can stand up for their rights without infringing on the rights that other people have to disagree or to act or behave differently.

This boils down to RESPECT—requiring respect from others and giving respect to others ... period!

Assertive communicators can exhibit one or more of these characteristics:

- Express feelings, wants or needs clearly, appropriately and respectfully
- Use "I" statements vs. "you" statements
- Listen without interrupting (LISTEN=SILENT)
- Feel confident and in control of self (EI self-management)
- Make good eye contact (not glaring)
- Speak in a calm and clear tone of voice

- Have a relaxed body posture
- Feel connected to others
- Not allow others to abuse or manipulate them (set boundaries)
- Stand up for their rights (without infringing on the rights of others)

Aggressive Communication

Aggressive communication or behavior is defined as "a direct attack or assault to communicate emotion(s)." This holds true even if someone is predominantly a passive communicator, but they cross over into aggressive behavior.

Aggressive communicators will often:

- Try to dominate others
- Use humiliation to control others
- Criticize, blame or attack others
- Be very impulsive
- Have low frustration tolerance
- Speak in a loud, demanding and overbearing voice
- Be rude or threaten others
- Not listen well
- Interrupt frequently
- Use "you" statements often accompanied by that pointed finger!
- Have piercing eye contact and an overbearing posture

I find that aggressive communication is the most widely misinterpreted style. For example, there are people in this world who have been given loud, boisterous voices—and every time they speak, they're told that they are being "aggressive." Of course this is based on the recipient's interpretation, but the reality is the speaker is just loud. That might make them annoying, hard to work next to in a cubicle or even abrasive—but just because someone is loud, that does not automatically make them aggressive.

So how do we know if someone is being aggressive? What are the signals for us as the recipient of the communication to know if we need to set a boundary or stand up for ourselves?

Consider this: Aggressive communicators usually come at you with a very clear motive. Is the speaker's motive to intimidate? Are they using intimidation, fear or belittlement to get what they want or punish you in some way? If the answer is yes, this could clearly be an aggressive communication.

Here are some examples of how an aggressive communicator might express intimidation:

1. "Others have no rights"
2. "My way or the highway"
3. Inappropriate or foul language
4. In your face or in your space
5. Idle threats
6. Personal attacks

Aggressive communicators are often accused of being very difficult to communicate with. At some point, you might have felt the exact same way. Let's find out.

Do you have someone in your life who you would consider to be aggressive? Think about them for a moment ... picture in your mind an interaction with this person. Now answer these questions:

- Is this person usually direct in their communication style?
- Does this person usually tell you exactly how they feel or what they think?
- Is this person usually clear about what they want or need?

If you answered YES to these questions, as most people do, then I have one more question for you ...

What about this person is so difficult to communicate with?

Aren't they being clear and concise? Of course they are!

So what's missing? Ah, yes ... are they nice?

Most of us would agree that aggressive communicators are not usually perceived as being nice. However, if someone is clear and concise, they are communicating well. They simply don't make YOU feel good when they communicate.



MODULE 3: PASSIVE, PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE AND LESSER-KNOWN STYLES

When we talk about people who are difficult to communicate with, we really must look at passive communicators.

Passive Communication

Passive communication is driven by an emotional response that primarily includes avoiding any type of confrontation.

These communicators are usually VERY nice ... or at least they appear to be nice. Their challenge, however, is with the clear and concise aspects of assertive communication.

While not always the case, passive communicators are often dealing with low self-esteem, insecurities or a lack of self-confidence. They may feel like they don't have any rights; therefore, they don't feel the need to stand up for their own rights. They may feel that if the other person has a position of greater power, then he or she is "more important."

Some have described passive communicators as outwardly nice, yet inwardly hostile. They tend to beat around the bush—I call it breadcrumb communication. They drop metaphorical breadcrumbs in the forest—maybe you can follow the message and maybe you can't.

Some of the more common characteristics of passive communicators include:

- Failing to speak up for themselves
- Allowing others to deliberately or inadvertently infringe on their rights
- Failing to express their feelings, needs or opinions
- Speaking softly or apologetically
- Exhibiting poor eye contact and slumped body posture

Passive communicators dislike conflict—so they will do almost anything to avoid it.

Many times passive communicators, because they dislike conflict so much, will talk to everyone except the one person who can fix the problem or do something about it. As a result, they can easily be misinterpreted as gossips or people who stir the pot.

So how does this passive communicator become passive-aggressive? Let's take a look.

By definition, a passive-aggressive person will be outwardly nice, but inwardly hostile UNTIL they have brewed and stewed and worked themselves into a frenzy. Then they show up and verbally throw up on people. They wait until ANGER gives them the courage to confront the situation. And when that happens, they present like an aggressive person.

Passive-aggressive communicators will often:

- Mutter to themselves rather than confront the person or issue
- Have difficulty acknowledging their anger
- Use facial expressions that don't match how they feel—for example, smiling when angry
- Use sarcasm
- Deny there is a problem
- Appear cooperative while purposely doing things to annoy and disrupt
- Use subtle sabotage to get even

Lesser-known Communication Styles

There are occasions when a straight communication style may not be the most appropriate or effective. On rare occasions, you may have to combine styles to either escalate an issue or get the results you need without offending an insecure co-worker or overstepping authority. In these rare occasions, you might resort to assertive-aggressive or passive-assertive styles.

Up to this point, we've defined and discussed both assertive and aggressive communication styles. By combining those two definitions, the definition for the assertive-aggressive style emerges. Definition: Clear and concise communication, that isn't necessarily nice in the delivery (verbally or nonverbally).

You might deliver your message directly ... it can be clear and easy to understand. However, you might escalate your delivery for a variety of reasons. Either the first assertive delivery was ineffective, or the recipient of your message responded in a manner that required you stepping up just a bit to stand your ground.

Sometimes anger and aggression are useful and important at work. For example, if you must deal with a difficult person and the event requires firm, clear intentions, aggression can be an ally. Remember—you must choose the aggressive style deliberately and consciously, not find yourself caught up in a reactive emotion.

On those rare occasions when you are being assertive-aggressive, I would recommend you go there just long enough to get the attention of the recipient, and then take a breath, pull the reins in on that emotion, and revert back to an assertive discussion.

I do believe there are times when a direct response, even an assertive one, would not be the best option. Not all supervisors or co-workers understand what you are learning today about communication. So when you do speak up assertively, they may still consider you as being abrasive or abrupt. And if that happens, there could be repercussions.

In those cases, another communication style that I use often is passive-assertive.

This is a subtle, but still clear and concise communication of emotion(s).



MODULE 4: ASSERTIVE TECHNIQUES

As we explore the techniques that you can use to assertively communicate with people, the

most important thing to remember is—STAY CALM! No matter what happens, don't let your emotions take over your tone or your body language. Not one of the techniques we are going to discuss will work if you are unable to control your tone and body language.

I would first like to provide you with a list of words that you might want to consider taking out of your vocabulary. Let's make two columns. The first column is *authoritative* terms and the second column is *alternate* terms.

The authoritative terms include: Need, Should, Must, Have to, Ought to

The alternate terms include: Important, Imperative, Necessary, Crucial, Beneficial

You will see that the authoritative terms are just that—authoritative. These are terms that bosses may use with subordinates or parents may use with children—in other words, demanding terms that are used by people in positions of authority. If you use parental terms with grown adults, you could be met with resistance. They might actually be saying to themselves, “I don’t HAVE TO do anything.” Assertive communicators don’t have to rely on demanding terms to make their point, so you might want to start using the alternate terms in your communications.

Scripting

Scripting is the practice of writing out or planning what you want to say instead of shooting from the hip. If you’ve ever tried to shoot from the hip before, you may have found that sometimes you don’t get the gun out of your holster and you shoot yourself in the foot!

The EASY model looks like:

E – Express how it affects you

The “E” can be very simple verbiage like: “I’m confused,” “I’m surprised,” “I’m shocked,” “I’m concerned.”

These are all statements that specify how you’re affected or how you’re feeling.

A – Address the situation

BRIEFLY outline or describe the situation that you are addressing.

S – Specify what you want or need

Outline what it is that you want or need the person to do or change.

Y – Yes or no question

Ask for the person to buy into or agree with your request.

The one question you do NOT want to use is “Do you understand?” This is a question that rarely produces an accurate answer. Most of the time, the recipient will simply say “yes” regardless of whether they understand or not. The yes or no question should be one that requires agreement to your request or suggestion.

Two things to note as you practice this scripting model:

1. **No more than two sentences.** Since many of us have a challenge keeping our communications concise and to the point, a good rule of thumb is to keep each part of the script—the E, A, S or Y—to no more than two sentences.

2. **You don’t have to deliver your script in this order.** You can deliver the script in any order that makes sense. The scripting model is merely an acronym to help you remember what you want to include in your script.

Active and Reflective Listening

- **Active listening** requires the listener to repeat back what he or she hears to the speaker. This is done by re-stating or paraphrasing what is heard in your own words.
- **Reflective listening** involves two key steps: Seeking to understand the speaker’s idea, then offering the idea back to the speaker

As you can see in these definitions, there is a slight difference between active listening and reflective listening. In both, the listener or recipient repeats back what they’ve heard the speaker say. However, reflective listening involves an additional step—the listener or recipient seeking to actually understand the speaker’s idea. Reflective listening puts the responsibility on the message recipient to understand and clarify the speaker’s message.

Once the speaker has finished, the recipient can use any of the following transitional phrases to reflect the message back:

- So what you’re saying is ...
- You’re suggesting ...
- You think ...
- You feel ...
- If I heard (understood) you correctly ...
- So your concern is ...
- If I’m on the same page ...

By practicing and using active and reflective listening skills, you benefit in the following ways:

- If you know that you will have to repeat the message back in your own words, you’re sort of forced to listen to the speaker. This improves your listening skills.
- You acknowledge to the speaker that you were listening and that you do care
- You confirm what you heard and that the idea presented has been understood correctly. This avoids any misunderstanding later in the conversation.

Assertive communication techniques that can help you as you handle conflict, crucial conversations or difficult people:

- **Broken record**

With the broken record technique, you keep repeating your point, using a low-level, pleasant voice. Don't get pulled into arguing or trying to explain yourself. This lets you ignore manipulation, baiting and irrelevant logic.

- **Fogging**

Fogging is a way to deflect negative, manipulative criticism. You agree with some of the facts, but retain the right to choose your behavior.

While you can agree with some of the facts, you don't agree to change your work area. Fogging is great for avoiding fights and encouraging people to stop criticizing.

- **Content to process shift**

Content to process shift means that you stop talking about the problem and instead bring up how the other person is behaving in that moment. You can use this method when someone's not listening or trying to use humor or a distraction to avoid the issue.

- **Defusing**

Defusing is the process to use when you really need to allow someone to cool down before discussing an issue.

If they try to stay with it, you always have the right to walk away. But—STAY CALM!

- **Assertive inquiry**

Assertive inquiry is similar to the content to process shift. This helps to identify the real issue when the argument is actually about something bigger than the immediate topic.

- **Negative assertion**

When criticized, most people will either react passively by hiding from it or feeling hurt by it, or aggressively by lashing out at the person giving the criticism. Negative assertion allows you to accept the criticism while not allowing it to negatively affect you. By openly admitting your mistakes without excuses, you prevent other people from manipulating you with guilt. You also avoid a lot of pointless conflicts and instead give yourself the room to grow and improve from your mistakes. All in all, negative assertion is a good way to handle constructive criticism assertively.

- **Negative inquiry**

While negative assertion is a good technique to use when someone directs constructive criticism toward you, there are times when you have to deal with destructive or manipulative criticism as well. Negative inquiry is a technique you can use to handle criticism that's designed to simply push your buttons or make you feel bad about yourself. By using this technique, you will be able to extract more specific and useful information from the criticism than you otherwise would if you immediately opposed or rejected it. In addition, you can protect yourself from criticism that's just designed to belittle or manipulate you.

Well, that brings us to the end of this training. Let's recap the key points that we learned:

1. We all have habits that may not be serving us well ... and that really need to be changed or improved in order to achieve communication success
2. Message recipients ARE 50% responsible for the success of any communication
3. Emotions can undermine your communications, both in delivering and receiving messages
4. In mixed-message scenarios, your tone and body language will speak louder than your words
5. Scripting or planning your messages in advance will allow you to give thought to your desired outcome, choose your words more carefully and stay on track when you deliver your message
6. Utilizing assertive techniques and skill sets will help you communicate more assertively on a more regular basis

By practicing the techniques in this training, you will be on your way to becoming a confident, effective and assertive communicator.

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