

## Learning Package Seven

# Assertive Communication



Image from - <http://vtiperformance.com/CommunicationTraining/assertivecommunicator.html>

This Learning Package ties together some earlier material from the module with some new content on communication skills.

- Active listening
- Common mistakes in listening
- Reflecting content
- Reflecting feelings
- Respond to criticism with empathy
- Own what's yours
- Features of assertive communication
- The Five Principles of Assertive Behaviour

Relationships may be improved with effective communication skills. With the use of clear and direct language we can clarify the nature of problems, express our needs, and discuss the desired outcomes. What skills do good communicators use? How do these skills enhance conflict resolution? This Learning Package focuses on answers to these questions.

The central skills which assist in resolving conflict are the use of active listening; reflecting the content of the conversation; reflecting feelings; and use of “I” statements.

It will be recalled from the material in Learning Package Three (“Personality Differences and Conflict handling Styles”) that the most effective style of managing conflict is the Assertive Style. The micro skills presented in the present Learning Package are therefore based on the principles of Assertive Communication.

### **Active Listening**

This skill is (as you can imagine) the art of focusing on what the other person is saying. It is not the act of waiting until they finish speaking so you can talk! Be aware too of non-verbal communication in the form of body language. Listen for actual words being used, and try to understand where this person is coming from. It is not necessary to agree with them but rather to simply try to understand nature of the problem from this person’s perspective. When people see that you are genuinely listening, it can be like the flicking of a switch. They recognise you are trying to understand their point of view.

### When to use Active Listening:

- You are not quite sure what somebody really means but don't want to ask outright
- You want to make sure you have understood correctly
- You are about to disagree
- You can hear real emotion in the speaker's voice
- Someone is talking about their feelings and emotions
- Someone is talking about a personal matter or problem
- You want to reassure the speaker that you are listening non-judgmentally.

### Some Common Mistakes in Listening

- Assuming in advance that what someone has to say is uninteresting or unimportant, or that you know what they are going to say
- Letting your mind wander and losing the thread of what the speaker is saying
- Mentally criticising the speaker's delivery instead of listening for their real message
- Getting heated when something is said that you disagree with
- Failing to focus on the other's point of view, trying only to get your own point of view across
- Wanting to be active, that is, to be speaking rather than listening
- Listening only to the facts and not the feelings behind the facts
- Pretending to be attentive while thinking about something else
- Daydreaming
- Clock-watching
- Fidgeting
- Judging the speaker instead of listening carefully to their message
- Overreacting to certain words or phrases
- Thinking about what you'll say when it's your turn to speak

Once you have absorbed what has been said, it is time to make sure you have accurately understood. An effective way to do this is to reflect back to the speaker the content of what has been said.

## Reflecting the Content

### Step 1

Listen carefully to the speaker

### Step 2

Start your sentence with the opening phrase 'I see' (or 'In other words') 'so what you are saying is....'

### Step 3

Continue the statement by repeating the core statement of what was just said. It is important that you use the speaker's words and not change them to suit your interpretation.

### Step 4

Finalise the statement with the phrase 'Is that right?' or 'Have I understood you correctly?'

This responds to the way the person would be feeling.

It demonstrates understanding and encourages a more open level of communication.

Examples

- "I guess you're feeling pretty confused"
- "You seem pretty upset"
- "Sounds like you're angry about...."

## Reflecting Feelings

### "I" Statements

The Aim:

- Clean communication
- Clear, brief and to the point

The Intention:

- An opener to minimise defensiveness
- Clean, unpolluted with blame, innuendoes, should, never and always
- The purpose of an "I" statement is to make a clear, clean statement of your experience of an event, incident etc, in a way that another person will hear and not need to defend.

"WHEN YOU DO THAT (Neutral description) I FEEL. (No blame). ...AND WHAT I'D LIKE IS ....."

Example of a Clean “I” statement:

- When I am interrupted before I finish my sentence
- I feel negated/diminished/put down
- And what I’d like is to complete my sentence

### **Respond to Criticism with Empathy**

When someone verbally attacks you or is negatively critical, it’s easy to feel that they’re wrong, and get defensive. While criticism is hard to hear, and often exaggerated or coloured by the other person’s emotions, it’s important to listen for the other person’s pain and respond with empathy for their feelings. Also, look for what’s true in what they’re saying; that can be valuable information for you. Above all, do not respond to anger with more anger – it only escalates the situation.

### **Own What’s Yours**

We all have a personal contribution in a conflict. Realise that owning your personal responsibility is a strength, not a weakness. Effective communication involves admitting when you’re wrong. If you both share some responsibility in a conflict (which is usually the case), look for and admit to what’s yours. It defuses the situation, sets a good example, and shows maturity. It also often allows the other person to own their contribution to the conflict as well and respond in kind, leading you both closer to mutual understanding and a solution.

#### Features of Assertive communication

We can regard Assertive Communication as the ability to express your feelings, opinions, beliefs and needs, openly and honestly, while not violating the personal rights of others.

Assertive behaviour is:

- Self expressive
- Honest
- Direct
- Self enhancing
- Not hurtful to others
- Partly composed of the content of the message
- Partly composed of the non-verbal style of the message
- Appropriate for the person and the situation

- Socially responsible
- A combination of learning skills, not an inborn trait

### Assertive behaviours

- Improves personal development
- Improves personal relationships
- Increases self-esteem
- Increases effectiveness and performance at work
- Further communication is not hampered by unresolved issues
- Reduces fear of risks
- Gives you a sense of control over your own life

### The Five Principles of Assertive Behaviour

A summary of the material in this Learning Package can be summarised in the Five Principles of Assertive Behaviour.

1. Stay Focused.
2. Listen Carefully
3. Try To See Their Point of View
4. Respond to Criticism with Empathy
5. Own What's Yours

These principles sound simple, but the reality is their application takes considerable effort and commitment to put in practice.

#### Exercise Seven

Practice using each of these skills separately, with colleagues or patients. Note how the careful application of these skills alters the conversational dynamic when they are used. In what ways have the various components of this module (as a whole) changed the way you deal with others in the workplace?