

4 Actions Toward an Assertive Approach for Women at Work

BY JAN ARZOOMAN

December 27, 2018



For women who have been socialized to be people pleasers, becoming assertive at work can seem daunting. But the rewards of being assertive are worth the effort of transformation, says Carrie Spell-Hansson, CEO of the Folke Institute for Transformative Learning and an AMA instructor.

“Being assertive does not guarantee that you’re going to get what you want, but what it does guarantee is that people will know what it is that you want and how you feel,” Spell-Hansson says.

Committing to assertiveness training

Taking an assertiveness training class (like AMA’s *Assertiveness Training for Women in Business*, which Spell-Hansson teaches) is one way of affirming that you want to make a change. Her students learn that “just by virtue of being a human being, you can express how you feel,” she says, and that they are not alone.

“We tend to feel isolated, like ‘No one knows the challenges I have,’” Spell-Hansson points out. “You might have 15 people in class saying, ‘Oh my god, we’re all saying the same thing.’ That confirmation that there’s nothing wrong with you is huge.”

Becoming an assertive woman requires action, however. Spell-Hansson suggests the following:

Acknowledge that you want to be more assertive. “Assertiveness is a choice, and you get to decide on a case-by-case basis when to be assertive,” Spell-Hansson says. A woman may hesitate because of the misconception that assertiveness means being aggressive.

“Assertiveness is sharing and expressing to people what my wants, needs, and feelings are in a clear and direct manner while taking theirs into consideration,” Spell-Hansson explains. It’s “being able to express how I feel but not making the other person wrong.”

If you are worried that people might react badly to your new assertiveness, don’t be, Spell-Hansson says. “In most cases people will be relieved,” she says. “No one can read our minds—which is why when you take a stand and are clear with people about what your thoughts, wants, needs, or feelings are, then it’s going to be quite a relief.”

Identify what you want and need. Becoming clear about who you are, what you need, and what’s important to you—self-awareness— isn’t so simple, Spell-Hansson says. “We haven’t taken the time to explore that because we’ve been working hard at suppressing ourselves.” After that comes “the internal work”—working on self-confidence and accepting and embracing who you are.

Take classes. “Classes give you—like the workshops that you offer at AMA—that safe, supportive environment working with people who are experts in the area so that you can begin to gain that confidence,” Spell-Hansson says. “It’s difficult to just do it on your own.”

An assertiveness training class, beyond giving you tools to work with, can be transformative for many people. “People leave [the class] having made a shift in how they think and how they view themselves,” she says.

Practice and hold yourself accountable. Find a mentor—maybe your company has a mentoring program—or a coach or accountability partner. A professional coach is an investment, so interview three or four of them and make sure it's someone you connect with, Spell-Hansson suggests. Try the International Coach Federation for help finding a coach who meets your needs. Or, ask a co-worker or friend to be an accountability partner.

You might contact your partner or coach, for example, before a meeting where you have to give a presentation. Maybe a co-worker who always tries to shut you down will be there. You commit to an assertive response if you get pushback from someone—and you go into the meeting prepared, Spell-Hansson says. After the meeting, you can debrief with your partner.

The important thing is making commitments and asking your partner to hold you to them and keep you on track, she explains. Otherwise, it's easy to fall back into the old habit of passivity.

The longer you practice being assertive, Spell-Hansson says, the closer you'll get to a time where you see there's a shift in how you see yourself or how you see the situation. You won't be able to go back to how you saw it before. "That opening, if you will, is the start of doing it differently," she says.



AMA's Women's Leadership Center features classes specifically for woman to learn to be assertive at work, to have a more executive presence, or to communicate with authority.

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