How to Be Assertive (Without Losing Yourself)

Recommended

Conventional wisdom says that assertive people get ahead. They tell people what they think, request the resources they need, ask for raises, and don't take no for an answer. So what are non-assertive people supposed to do if their company's culture rewards these actions? If you're shy or reserved, don't fret. You can ask for what you need and get what you want, while still being yourself.

What the Experts Say

Managers need some degree of self-confidence to be effective. "The right amount of assertiveness, respect for others, and intelligence is what makes a great leader," says Lauren Zander, co-founder and chairman of the Handel Group, an executive coaching firm in New York City, and author of "Designing Your Life," a course taught through MIT. Yet, there needs to be a balance. "There's a sweet spot for assertiveness. If you're below the range, you're not going to get your way. If you're above it, you're not getting along with others," says Daniel Ames, a professor of management at Columbia Business School and author of "Pushing Up to a Point: Assertiveness and Effectiveness in Leadership and Interpersonal Dynamics." The good news is, "Being shy is not a permanent condition. Assertiveness can be learned," says Zander. The key is to understand the context, assess your behavior, and then make the appropriate adjustments.

Understand the context

Assertiveness is not universally understood to be a positive trait. Before you make changes to your behavior, know the context you are working in. Does the culture — national, regional, or organizational — truly value forcefulness? Or do you work in a situation where a persuasive, quiet approach is sometimes more esteemed? Whether your assertiveness will be rewarded also depends on your gender. Avivah Wittenberg-Cox, CEO of 20-first, one of the world's leading gender consulting firms, and author of *How Women Mean Business* warns that women who ask for what they want are often described as "bitchy and aggressive." Ames agrees: "The range of latitude for women is smaller for what they can get away with," he says. Consider the implications of your behavior before you alter it.

Evaluate your level of assertiveness

You can do this by either assessing your own behavior or asking others for input. Zander suggests you ask yourself: "Are you willing to talk to anyone about what you want?" Most people will answer this question with some qualifications, which indicates the need to overcome fear and express your opinion more often. Ames

also suggests you complete “a success inventory” to understand whether your style is effective. Over a defined period of time — a few weeks or a month — before entering a discussion or meeting, ask yourself, “What do I want from this situation?” Then, afterwards, evaluate the results: “Did I get what I wanted?” This will create a track record of your success and indicate whether you need to adjust your style.

Objectively rating your own behavior can be difficult. “The connection between what we think we’re doing and what others see is very weak. Often it’s not greater than chance,” says Ames. Therefore, it might help to get feedback from trusted colleagues or to conduct a 360-degree review.

Set goals and stick to them

If you find in your assessment that you are holding back in situations where you shouldn’t, ask yourself what you aren’t saying and why you’re keeping quiet. Next time you enter a similar situation, rehearse what you are going to say and how you will say it beforehand. Ames and Zander both suggest you challenge yourself with a specific time-bounded behavioral goal. For example, give yourself a week to initiate three difficult conversations with colleagues. Or tell yourself that for the next two weeks, whenever you’re in a group discussion, you’ll speak up within the first two minutes. “Focused incremental changes add up to real change,” Ames says. If you’re successful, set another goal and stick to it. If it doesn’t work, don’t beat yourself up. Try a different one. “Approach it with an attitude of playfulness,” he says.

Build relationships

Often times people hold back because they are uncomfortable in a situation, either because they don’t know people or they’re afraid of what others might think. “My experience with reserved, shy people is that the relational context matters to them,” says Ames. Therefore, it can help to get to know people outside of work. “Connect with work colleagues who are only casual acquaintances. Socialize with colleagues in a way that breaks down barriers,” Ames recommends. You may be less cautious about speaking up if you’re at ease socially.

Stay true to yourself

Altering your style to be more assertive can feel inauthentic, but it doesn’t have to be. You’re not changing your character; you are making deliberate choices about how you behave. “Don’t feel you have to muster interpersonal coldness to accompany your assertion. Feel free to be friendly and empathic while asking for your needs to be met,” says Ames. Find your own style instead of trying to imitate others. This is especially true for women. “Women need to be aware that becoming more like men is not sustainable,” says Cox. Nor do you need to be more assertive in every context every day. “You can bring out your competitive side when it’s useful and you can dial back and be accommodating when it’s helpful,” says Ames.

There’s a line — know when you’ve crossed it

Be careful that in your quest, you don’t become a bully or a nuisance. Zander warns that being overly assertive is often interpreted as self-promotional or arrogant. Monitor the impact you have on others. “The costs of being overly assertive are not immediately apparent to us. If you yell at a subordinate, she may do what you asked but she may also go home and update her resume,” says Ames. Be sure your efforts to push more are well intended. “Assertiveness is most appreciated when it’s in the service of the team,” says Zander.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Assess your own degree of assertiveness and ask others for feedback
- Set realistic goals to make small changes in your behavior and stick to them
- Forge relationships with colleagues outside of work so that you feel more comfortable speaking up

Don't:

- Assume that assertiveness is always a good thing — the context you work in and your gender both matter
- Try to imitate someone else's behavior — you can change while still being true to who you are
- Overcompensate and become aggressive — balance assertiveness with consideration of others

Case Study #1: Make promises and keep them
Katie Torpey is a filmmaker and screenwriter. Assertive executives and insistent dealmakers dominate the industry she works in. Katie was successful, making several movies and television episodes, but she often held back in meetings, rarely saying what was on her mind. Instead she said what she thought others wanted to hear. "I was a people pleaser. I didn't want to piss anyone off or hurt anyone's feelings," she says.

When Katie pitched work to producers they often lowballed her. "I was getting work, but I was not getting what I was worth." She blames no one but herself. "I would take what they offered because I was afraid to demand my asking price," she says. She was worried the project would fall through or they'd find another director. It became clear to Katie that this was hindering her career.

To change, she made a promise to herself: if she left a situation without saying what she really wanted, she would have to remedy it within 24 hours. For example, when she walked away from a meeting without telling her boss that a product wasn't actually ready, she forced herself to contact him within 24 hours to fess up. This practice paid off. After cleaning up several of her messes, she realized it was much easier to be assertive from the outset. "Living a life where you speak what you think and feel is so much more freeing than holding everything in," she says.

This has changed her career for the better. "People respect me. I still have the same abilities but I now have more confidence. People know that I won't take a job unless my heart's in it and I'm paid well," she says. And if producers ask her to take a lower price, she stands up for herself, saying, "I will do an excellent job for you, but you have to pay me my asking price."

Case Study #2: Put yourself out there
Jigar Parikh was working as an attorney at a New York law firm, and hated his job so he hired a personal coach to help him find a new profession. He soon, however, realized that the problem wasn't his field; it was his firm. His coach encouraged him to build his network and secure enough clients to quit his job and start his own law practice. But Jigar was shy and uncomfortable reaching out to people he didn't know. "I was someone who really held back," he says.

So Jigar started small. He made a commitment to talk about his budding law practice with one or two people each day. This proved to be harder than he thought. "I didn't want my current employer to find out, so I had to be especially careful," he says. And he struggled at the networking events he attended three or four times a week. But he didn't want to fall down on his pledge so he soon found himself talking to strangers on the subway or in a restaurant. "I once talked to a doctor who was an entrepreneur himself and he gave me some great advice," he says. "I had some amazing conversations."

This all gave him the confidence he needed to leave the firm. “When you’re not assertive, you settle for things and I had a high tolerance for being in places where I was unhappy,” he says. Now he feels like a very different person. “Anyone who knows me now is shocked to find out that I was shy. But it’s not always easy. I still have to remind myself to get out there,” he says.