



# Assertive Communication

In order to communicate as effectively as possible – in particular during conflict – it's important to learn how to break old habits of escalating or checking out. Conflict is a necessary part of any relationship, so the key is to make conflict productive by keeping under control and working to create as much understanding as possible. Communication styles exist on a continuum with passive on one end, aggressive on the other, and assertive right in the middle:

Aggressive	Assertive	Passive
Only MY needs matter	BOTH of our needs matter	Only YOUR needs matter

The core of assertive communication is to first work to understand the other person's point. The first step to assertive communication is: **Quit trying to win or escape and focus on working to understand the other person's point of view in great detail.** Only then should you work to clarify your point to her/him. Avoid "fixing" or identifying next steps – showing that you care enough to understand the other person's perspective is "doing" something and is the best way to tee up your own perspective so that s/he is likely to really hear and understand you.

You do this by using a few concrete techniques:

## **FIRST, You Lead with Wanting to Understand The Other Person**

Open questions – Ask the person a series of questions to better understand her/his position in great detail. Open questions can't be answered with a simple "yes" or "no," and don't ask sarcastic or leading ones that are contemptuous or suggest what the other person needs to do. It can be very helpful to ask questions about how the current situations relate to others in her/his life (potentially in the past). Bottom line is that you need to understand concretely specifically why this is so important to the person. Take NOTHING for granted (no mind reading!), and ask a minimum of 3-4 questions.

Restatements – Once you've asked the open question and you've heard the other person's response, restate what you heard back – "OK, so it sounds like you're saying etc. etc." Doing so not only helps the other person to feel heard, but also allows her/him to correct you as needed. **ONLY THEN** once it's clear that the other person feels understood...

## **THEN, Following Up with Wanting to be Understood**

Now, it's your turn to explain your perspective. Do NOT argue for nor try to persuade your partner of your point of view; just explain how you see things – you want to be understood even if s/he doesn't agree with you. First, tell the other person all of your **feelings** (emotions, not thoughts) and then clarify your thoughts on the issue, and work to express how this specific issue relates to other experiences you've had in the past, your values, other people, experiences as a child/in your family of origin, etc. Ideally, s/he is asking you open questions and making restatements, but might not know to do so. It can be helpful to ask that the other person ask you questions and restate what s/he heard.

### **Don't try to solve the problem -YET**

It's much too soon to solve it. You first need to end the opposition and become each other's friend instead of foes. Be interested – try to understand the meaning of the other person's point of view. The goal is to move from gridlock to dialogue and to understand – IN DEPTH – the other's position. **You don't want a relationship in which you always win and are influential while crushing the other person.** You want a relationship in which you support each other, and by understanding each other more deeply, you're very likely to find the common ground that wasn't evident to begin with.



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## Assertive Communication Template

When you have some type of conflict or feel that your boundaries have been pushed in some way, a key technique that you can use to communicate clearly and productively is to follow this template:

1. “When you.....[Concrete/observable behavior]...”
2. “.. then I felt.....[Feelings – name actual emotions]...”
3. “..and in the future, I wish you would.....[Reasonable concrete/observable behavior].”

Following this approach accomplishes several key goals. First, you avoid making generalizations to other situations or personalizing by letting the person know what specifically happened that was hard for you. Second, you share your internal emotional experience with the other person. Often, men appear to be angry and/or checked out, but the other person has no way of knowing that they also feel anxious, threatened, ashamed, lonely, hurt, etc. Finally, by letting the person know what you’re hoping for in the future, you’ve educated her/him about how your needs related to her/his behavior. The person might not be inclined to do so, but at least you’ve been clear about your boundary and can observe from there on out if the person does so.

**Here’s a bad example** of using this technique:

1. “When you [disrespected me]...” – This is NOT concrete, it’s an interpretation.
2. “... then I felt [like you just don’t care]...” – This isn’t a feeling, it’s a thought (try “rejected” instead).
3. “... and in the future, I wish you would [be more considerate].” – This is vague, not concrete behavior.

**Here’s a good example** of using this technique:

1. “When you [yelled at me and called me an idiot]...” – Concrete behavior with no interpretation.
2. “... then I felt [frustrated, confused, anxious, and defensive]...” – Named emotions, not thoughts.
3. “... and in the future, I wish you would [count to ten, take some deep breaths, and use a calm voice to let me know why you’re upset].”

It will very likely feel a bit awkward or robotic the first few times you use it, but as you practice, you’ll see how applicable – and useful – this technique can be with a variety of people including work colleagues, family, spouses, children, friends, etc.