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6 Tips for Being More Assertive at Work

January 13, 2015 • Contributed by [Cristalle Sese, PsyD, Young Adult Issues](#) Topic Expert Contributor



Being unable to speak up at work can have long-lasting negative consequences. It can lead to [stress](#), [burnout](#), or render you almost invisible in a setting where promotions and raises depend on visibility.

When you're assertive, you ask for what you need, you talk openly about what you want, and you recognize when someone is taking advantage of you. You can approach the things you do with confidence and make a direct impact on

your environment. But this does not come easily for everyone.

There are two important components to becoming more assertive: (1) learning to treat yourself with respect, and (2) building communication skills.

1. RECOGNIZE YOUR VALUE

The first step toward becoming more assertive is nurturing a realistic and respectful perspective on your value as a person. Many people struggle with attribution problems—attributing their failures to internal flaws (“I’m just no good at this, no matter how hard I try”) and their successes to luck (“That went well because it was easier than everyone thought it would be”), contributing to gnawing [self-doubt](#) and potentially a sense of [worthlessness](#).

Take a step back and think about what you contribute to your workplace. For now, try to quiet any [internal criticism](#) that wants to scrutinize your flaws, mistakes, and failures; those thoughts can evoke [shame](#) and cloud your ability to see your positive attributes. Take a balanced inventory of who you've been at work, noting both good things that you've done and anything you might want to improve.

2. KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

Educate yourself on the things you're entitled to in your workplace. The big wall of posted notices in your lunchroom, your employee policy manual, your job description—you might not know what's in all of that available material, despite it having important information.

Learning to be assertive in your workplace includes learning the legal and ethical boundaries of what you can expect from your work environment. For example, if you find that you're frustrated by being expected

to work through lunch four times a week, this material can tell you if that expectation violates laws in your state, which can support your desire to stand up for what you need. If you are being harassed or subjected to mistreatment, there may be protections in place to help you. Knowledge can help empower you to seek what you need.

3. KNOW YOUR BOUNDARIES

Learning and respecting your personal boundaries is an important step toward regulating stress and frustration. Taking on extra projects despite missing important family events, or continuing to answer work emails from your bed despite the interference with a proper night's rest—burnout is made of these ingredients. Think about what you can realistically expect of yourself and respect your limitations. We are all bound by our humanness and by time; there is no getting around those things, even if deadlines are looming.

Everyone benefits from your direct communication. Being exhausted or resentful is not only miserable, it keeps you from performing at your best.

4. PREPARE AND PRACTICE

First, prepare for being assertive at work in the safety of your [journal](#), your [therapy](#), or your [close relationships](#). Imagine what it might be like to communicate something difficult to your coworker or your boss. Ask yourself the following questions: What is my goal? What do I want to say? How would I like to say it?

Act it out in your mind, playing out both the ideal scenario and the scenario that scares you the most. Try talking it through with a loved one who would be open to role playing. Say aloud what you would like to communicate at work. If you don't, when the moment comes, your nerves might get you tongue-tied and it can feel easier to give up. Consider the things that are often difficult for you to say (for example, "No, I can't," or "That makes me uncomfortable") and rehearse them for future use.

5. LEARN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ASSERTIVE AND AGGRESSIVE

Many people quiet their voices because they have come to believe that speaking up is synonymous to being bossy, pushy, or disrespectful of other people. Being assertive does not have to be any of those things; it only means to value your own thoughts, feelings, and voice as well as those of others.

You can continue to be a kind, likable person while communicating directly. [Assertive communication](#) doesn't look to bulldoze over other people (that would be aggressive communication). Its goal is to create the best outcome for you in cooperation with the others in your workplace. "I disagree with that" is assertive and honest, and it opens up further conversation to move toward resolution. "What kind of stupid idea is that?" is aggressive and minimizing, and it shuts down conversation.

6. KEEP GROWING

The more you learn and grow, the more connected you can feel to your skills and your knowledge. [Confidence](#) is rooted in knowing yourself, your value, and the things you can offer to the world around you. Continue to cultivate your career, and acknowledge how your efforts and strengths bring benefits to your work environment.

Have [patience](#) with yourself as you make these changes. You may stumble through difficult conversations or lose nerve at the last moment. That's OK—many new things are hard at first, and building a direct

communication style is a process.

If you find that being assertive is particularly difficult, you can also address the issue through assertiveness training programs, [group psychotherapy](#), or individual psychotherapy.

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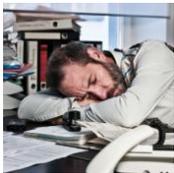
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Nissa

January 13th, 2015 at 10:55 AM

I am very lucky to work for someone who very much values my ideas and my work strengths and therefore that makes it a little easier to speak up for myself at times when I think that I am being brushed off or that I am undervalued. Now that doesn't happen too much because I think that he sees value in all of us, and that is the one thing that has made us so strong and competitive all of us know what strengths the others bring to the table and so we try to do things that will work with that instead of against it.

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banks

January 13th, 2015 at 3:12 PM

Sometimes I feel very patronized and like I am being looked down on for speaking my mind

I have sometimes in the back of my mind felt that the management is doing this on purpose because they are afraid that what I say actually makes sense and they are afraid it will overshadow them and then that feels pompous to even think that!

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Nan

January 14th, 2015 at 3:51 AM

Knowing your boundaries is crucial to establishing good working relationships with everyone at the office. There are going to be those times when you have the right answer and when done in the right way then you will be able to speak up and contribute. Everyone will definitely appreciate that. Do not on the other hand be that person who always thinks that his solution is the only correct one because believe me, after a while, no one will appreciate that at all.

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jamey

January 14th, 2015 at 11:18 AM

You have to know how to be assertive but still be a team player all at the same time

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Bart

January 14th, 2015 at 2:30 PM

I remember my first job out of college and how intimidated I was by everyone else who worked there and how afraid I was to speak up with any kind of new or innovative idea. I was afraid that they would think that it was goofy or would not fit with the company. And you know what happened? I failed to speak up so they had nothing to listen to and let me go after a few months. I was so sorry at that point that I had not spoken up more because I think that I had some really great ideas on projects that in hindsight I think that they would have liked a lot.

As a matter of fact I know that they liked them because when I went back and spoke with them a few months later and told them some things I had been working on, they hired me back. That was all the inspiration I needed to speak up and speak out the next time I knew that I had something to offer that no one else could.

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Coley

January 15th, 2015 at 10:39 AM

There are going to be those times when you have to take a stand because if you don't then there will always be that person who is going to run over you

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ladyluck

January 16th, 2015 at 9:21 AM

I wish my boss would read this

[Reply](#)



JoEllen

January 20th, 2015 at 10:56 AM

I guess that there are just those people who are naturally more confident and assertive than others. I do not happen to be one of those people. I am the type who will sit back and observe and even if I feel strongly about something I am not usually the person who will speak up about it. I understand that this is probably a fault that is doing nothing to get me ahead at work but it is hard for me to be that person to voice an opinion. I guess that in the end I am too afraid that others will not like what I have to say.

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Giulia

August 22nd, 2017 at 4:23 AM

How would you deal with a situation where someone who is unhappy about a situation is doing threats of disgracing the company via social media? I understood the situation, tried to resolve it but it's difficult to deal with irrational, arrogant people who think they are right at all costs.

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Ronald C.

March 15th, 2018 at 4:47 AM

Assertiveness is the single most important skill that we can acquire as professionals. Learning to communicate assertively can transform our professional life.

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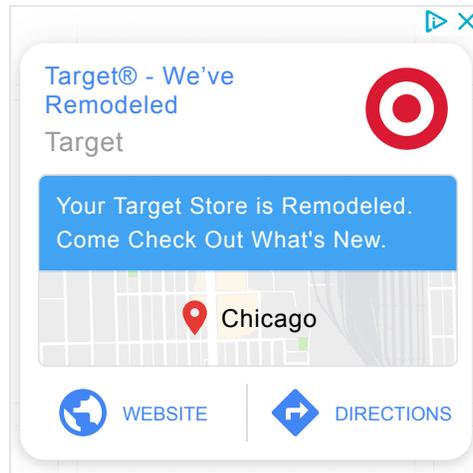
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