

It's Not What You Say,
It's How You Say It!

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Right A Guide To Assertive
Living

It takes two to speak truth
one to speak and another to
hear

— Henry David Thoreau

Self-expression is an universal human need. The form it takes is unique to each person, and consists of the several components of behavior described in this chapter. While individuals differences make the world go 'round, each of us can learn the skills necessary for good communication. How effective is your self-expression? Many people view ~~assertiveness~~ assertiveness as a verbal behavior, believing that they must have "just the right words" to handle a situation effectively. We've found that how you express an assertive message is a good deal more important than what you say. Although popular with many assertiveness trainers, it has never been our style to offer scripts of "what to say when." — We are primarily concerned with encouraging honesty and directness, and much of that message is communicated nonverbally. Participants in our groups and workshops have enjoyed watching us role-play a scene which makes the point clear: Bob is a dissatisfied customer who wishes to return a defective copy of Everything you always wanted to know about assertiveness, but was too timid to ask the bookstore; Mike is the clerk. Using essentially the same words, I bought this book here last week, and discovered that 20 pages are missing. I'd like a good copy or my money back. Bob approaches Mike in three different ways:

1. Bob walks slowly and hesitantly to the counter. His eyes are downcast at the floor, he speaks just above a whisper, his face looks as though it belongs on the cover of the book. He has a tight grip on the book, and a "please don't hurt me" posture.
2. Bob swaggers toward the counter, glares at Mike, addresses him in a voice heard all over the store. Bob's posture and fist-like gesture are an obvious attempt to intimidate the clerk.
3. Bob walks up to the counter facing Mike. He stands relaxed and erect, smiles, and looks directly at Mike with a friendly expression. In a conversational volume and tone of voice, he states the message, gesturing to point out the flaw on the book.

The three styles are over-exaggerated in our demonstration, of course, but the point is clear. The nonassertive, self-defeating style says to Mike that this customer is a pushover, and the slightest resistance will cause him to give up and go away. The second approach may achieve the goal of refund or exchange, but the aggressive Bob will leave with Mike's hostility directed at his back! With the assertive approach, Bob gets what he came for, and Mike feels good about having helped solve a problem.

For an appreciative customer. The components of assertive behavior - systematic observations of assertive behavior have led behavioral scientists to conclude that there are several important components which contribute to an assertive act. Our thinking in this area was significantly influenced by the late Michael Serben, a California psychiatrist who did extensive work with assertiveness training in the 1960s and '70s. It should be noted that most of the research in this field has been done with North Americans of European ancestry. Ethnic and cultural considerations are very important influences on the components described in this chapter. You are urged to reread the discussion of cultural factors in chapter 2, and to be aware of cultural dimensions as you study these aspects of behavior. With that caveat in mind, then, let's examine the key components of assertive behavior in detail:

Eye contact: One of the most obvious aspects of behavior when talking to another person is when you look. In general, if you look directly at the person do you speak, it helps to communicate your sincerity and to increase the directness of your message. If you look down or away much of the time, you present a lack of confidence or a quality of deference to the other person. If you stare too intently, the other person may feel an uncomfortable invasion. We do not advocate that you maximize eye contact. Continuously looking at someone can make the other person uncomfortable, is inappropriate and unnecessary, and may appear to be a game. Moreover, eye contact is a cultural variable; many cultural groups limit the amount of eye contact which is acceptable, particularly between age groups or members of the opposite sex. Nevertheless, the importance of eye contact is obvious. A relaxed and steady gaze at the other, looking away occasionally as is comfortable, helps to make conversation more personal, to show interest in and respect for the other person, and to enhance the directness of your message. As is true with ~~other~~ other behaviors, eye contact may be improved by conscious effort, in small steps. Be aware of your eyes as you talk with others and attempt to gradually optimize your eye attention in conversation.

Body Posture: As you watch other people talking with each other, carefully observe how each is standing or sitting. You may be ~~amazed~~ amazed as we have been by the number of people who talk with someone while their bodies are turned away from that person. People sitting side by side often turn only their heads toward one another while talking. Next time you are in that situation, notice how much more personal the conversation becomes with a slight turn of the torso — say 30 degrees — toward the other person. Relative power in an encounter may be emphasized by standing or sitting. A particularly evident power imbalance may be seen in the relationship between a tall adult and a small child; the adult who is thoughtful enough to bend or ~~even~~ crouch to the child's height will find an observable difference in the quality of communication and usually a much more responsive child. In a situation in which you are called upon to stand up for yourself, it may be useful to do just that — stand up. An active and erect posture while facing the other person directly lends additional assertiveness to your ~~own~~ message. A slumped, passive stance gives the other person an immediate advantage, as does any tendency on your part to lean back or move away. I remember Bob's first approach to the bookstore clerk on page 68.)

Distance/Physical Contact: An interesting aspect of cross-cultural research into nonverbal communication is that of distance vs. closeness between people in conversation. As a very broad generalization, it has been said that, among European peoples, the farther north one goes, the farther apart individuals stand when engaged in conversation. In the United States, as in Europe, closeness seems to increase in warmer climates; but

There are important exceptions, notably among ethnic subcultures which value closeness and contact differently. Closeness is, of course, not necessarily related to temperature. Cultural and social customs are products of very complex historical factors. It is fascinating, for example, to constant the almost obligatory, polite distance present in the queue for a London bus, with the pushing, shoving body contact which is part of the cloakroom scramble at a winter play in Moscow! In the Arab world it is customary for men to greet one another with a hug and kiss, and to stand very close to each other. Interestingly, however, it would be considered very inappropriate for an Arab man to behave toward a woman in this way, yet that is quite common in the United States and Southern Europe. Distance from another person does have a considerable effect upon communication. Standing or sitting very closely, or touching, suggests intimacy in a relationship, unless the people happen to be in a crowd or very cramped quarters. The typical discomfort of elevators passengers is a classic example of the difficulty we have in dealing with closeness! Coming too close may offend the other person, make him/her defensive or open the door to greater intimacy. It can be worth while to check out accentuating your message with appropriate gestures. Gestures, openness and warmth. Bob Alberti traces his enthusiastic use of gestures in conversation to his Italian heritage. While gesturing is indeed a somewhat culturally-related behavior, a relaxed use of gestures can add depth or power to your messages. Uninhibited movement can also suggest openness, self-confidence (unless the gesturing is erratic and nervous), and spontaneity on the part of the speaker. facial expression. Ever see someone trying to express anger while smiling or laughing? It just doesn't come across. Effective assertions require an expression that agrees with the message. An angry message is clearest when delivered with a straight, non-smiling countenance. A friendly communication should not be delivered with a dark frown. Let your face say the same thing your words are saying. If you will look at yourself in the mirror, you can learn a great deal about what your face says on your behalf. First, relax all the muscles of your face as much as you can. Let go of your expression, relax the muscles around your mouth, let your jaw go loose, let your cheeks soften, along with the wrinkles of your forehead and around your eyes. Pay careful attention to the relaxed, soft feelings. Now smile bringing your mouth up as widely as you can. Feel the tightness in your cheeks, around your eyes, all the way up to your ears. Hold that smile, look at the expression in the mirror, and concentrate on the feelings of tightness. Now relax your face completely again. Notice the difference between the relaxed feelings and those of the tight smile, and the difference between the expressions you see in the mirror. With greater awareness of how your facial muscles feel in various expressions, and of how you look when you smile and when you are relaxed, you can begin to control your facial expression more consciously and to make it congruent with what you are thinking, feeling, or saying. and you may develop a more natural, less plastic smile for those times when you really want your happiness to show! Voice Tone, Inflection, Volume. The way we use our voices is a vital element in

Our communications. The same words spoken through clenched teeth in anger offer an entirely different message than when they are shouted with joy or whispered in fear. A level, well modulated, conversational tone is convincing without being intimidating. A whispered monotone will seldom convince another person that you mean business, while a shouted epithet will bring defenses into the path of communication. Voice is one of the easiest of the components of behavior on which to gain accurate feedback these days. Most everyone has easy access to a small cassette recorder which can be used to a "try out" different styles of your voice. You may wish to experiment with a conversational tone, an angry shouted blast, a caring message, a persuasive argument. You may be surprised at how quiet your "shouts" are, or at how loud your "conversational tone" is. Consider at least three dimensions of your voice: 1) tone (is it happy, whiny, seductively soft, angry?); 2) inflection (do you emphasize certain syllables, as in a question, or speak in a monotone or with "sing-song" effect?); 3) volume (do you try to gain attention without shouting or overpower others with loudness, or is it very difficult for you to speak even when you want to?) If you can control and use your voice effectively, you have acquired a powerful tool in your self-expression. Practice with a recorder, trying out different styles until you achieve a style you like. Allow time for changes to come, and use the recorder regularly to check your progress. Fluency. Psychiatrist Mike Serber employed an exercise he called "Sell me something", in which he asked the client to talk persuasively about an object, such as a watch, for thirty seconds. For many people, it is very difficult to put together a string of words lasting thirty seconds. A smooth flow of speech is a valuable asset to get your point across in any type of conversation. It is not necessary to talk rapidly for a long period; but if your speech is interrupted with long periods of hesitation, your listeners may get bored, and will probably recognize you are very unsure of yourself. Clear and slow comments are more easily understood and more powerful than rapid speech which is erratic and filled with long pauses and stammering. Once again, the tape recorder is a valuable tool. Use the machine to practice by talking on a familiar subject for thirty seconds. Then listen to yourself, noticing pauses of three seconds or more and space fillers such as "uhhh..." and "you know..." Repeat the same exercise, more slowly if necessary, trying to eliminate any significant pauses. Gradually increase the difficulty of the task by dealing with less familiar topics, trying to be persuasive, pretending to respond in an argument, or working with a friend to keep a genuine dialog going. The program of the Toastmasters International Training Communication organization offers a unique opportunity for practice with feedback from a supportive audience. In general, we advocate spontaneity of expression as a goal. ~~However~~ Nevertheless, while hesitation may diminish the effectiveness ~~of~~ of your assertions, it is never "too late" to be assertive! Even though the ideal moment has passed, you will usually find it worthwhile to go to the person at a later time and express your feelings. Indeed, it is so important to express one's feelings that psychologists have developed special techniques to help individuals express strong emotions toward those who may

Have died (e.g. parents) before the feelings could be expressed. Spontaneous
assertion will help keep your life clear, and will help you to focus accurately
on the feelings you have at the time. At times, however, it is necessary to
choose an occasion to discuss a strong feeling. It is not a good idea to
confront someone in front of others, for example, because extra defenses
are sure to be present under those conditions. If you must "let it all hang
out," find a private place and time to do so! Listening. This component is
perhaps the most difficult both to describe and to change, yet it may well
be the most important. Assertive listening involves an active commitment to
the other person. It requires your full attention, yet calls for no overt action
your part, although eye contact and certain gestures — such as nodding — are
often appropriate. Listening demonstrates your respect for the other person. It
requires that you avoid expressing yourself for a time, perhaps even putting
your own needs on hold as you listen, yet is not a nonassertive act. Listening
is not simply the physical ~~response~~ response of hearing sounds — indeed, deaf
persons may be excellent "listeners." Effective listening may involve giving
feedback to the other person, so that it is clear that you understand what was
said. Assertive listening requires at least these elements:

Tuning into the other person, by stopping other activities, turning off the tv, ignoring
other distractions, focusing your energy in his or her direction
Attending to the message, by making eye contact if possible, nodding to show
that you hear, perhaps touching her or him, and
Actively attempting to understand before responding, by thinking about the
underlying message — the feelings behind the words — rather than trying
to interpret or to come up with an answer

Assertiveness includes respect for the rights and feelings of others. That means
receiving — sensitivity to others — as well as assertive
sending

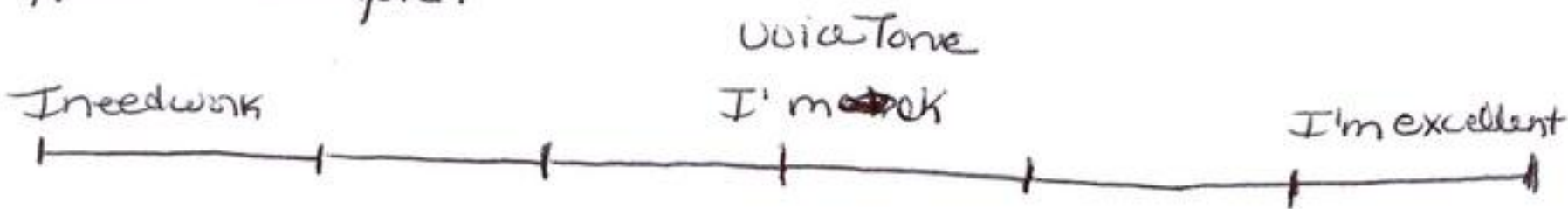
As with other components of assertive behavior, listening is a skill that can be
learned. It is hard work, takes patience, and requires other people willing
to work with you. Try to hook up with a "practice partner," and take turns
listening to each other and sharpening each other's listening skills. Practice
accurate paraphrasing of each other's communications, refining your
paraphrases until the partner agrees you've got it right. It will strengthen
your capacity to listen. Good listening will make all of your assertions
more effective, and will contribute much to the quality of your
relationships. Thoughts. Another component of assertiveness which escaped
direct ~~obs~~ observation is the thinking process. Although it has long been
understood intuitively that attitudes influence behavior, only recently has
psychological research been sophisticated enough to deal directly with the
link. Psychologists Albert Ellis of New York City and Donald Meichenbaum

of Ontario, Canada, and psychiatrists Aaron Beck of Philadelphia and David Burns of the University of Pennsylvania have been particularly influential in focusing attention on the cognitive dimensions of behavior. Ellis has reduced the ~~process~~ process to a simple A-B-C: (A) an event takes place; (B) a person sees and interprets it internally; (C) the person reacts in some way. Part B - the perception and thought process - often was ignored in the past. More recent developments in the field of "cognitive behavior therapy" have produced specific procedures for developing assertive thinking. Thus you can now work on your thoughts as well as your eye contact, posture, and gestures. Thinking, of course, is probably the most complex thing we humans do. As you might imagine, procedures for changing our thoughts and attitudes are very complex also. ~~we~~ We will discuss this area more in chapter 9, but for now, consider two aspects of your assertive thinking; your attitudes about whether it is a good idea in general for people to be assertive, and your thoughts about yourself when you are in a situation which calls for assertive action. Some people, for instance think it is not a good idea for anybody to express themselves, and jump as hell with you, we want you to pay particular attention to chapter 9 and work on thinking assertively! Content. We save this obvious dimension of assertiveness for last to emphasize that, although what you say is clearly important, it is often less important than most of us generally believe. We encourage honest and spontaneous expression. That means saying fearfully, "I'm damn mad about what you just did!" rather than, "You're an S.O.B!" Many people hesitate because they don't know what to say. Others have found the practice of saying something about their feelings at the time to be a valuable step. We encourage you to express yourself - and to take responsibility for your feelings. Don't blame the other person for how you feel. Note the difference in the above example between "I'm mad" and "You're ~~an~~ an S.O.B." It is not necessary to put the other person down (aggressive) in order to express ~~your~~ your feeling (assertive). You can imagine a wide variety of situations which show the importance of how you make yourself heard. The time you spend thinking about "just the right" words would be better spent making those decisions! The ultimate goal is ~~expressing~~ expressing yourself, honestly and spontaneously, in a manner right for you. Psychologists Myles Cooley and James Hillenbrand have developed a "components" model for assertive statements, made up of seven elements which are grouped into three general categories. They suggest that saying "no" or taking a stand includes starting your position, explaining your reason and expressing understanding. Asking favors or asserting rights may be expressed by stating the

the problem, making a request, and getting clarification. Finally, expressing feelings is accomplished by a statement of your emotions in a situation. (You may find it valuable to practice each of these types of statements with your practice partner or into a tape recorder.) Assertive ~~ness~~ does not depend upon being highly verbal, but some folks do seem to have difficulty finding the "right words." We do not advocate particular formulas or scripts for assertive expression, preferring to encourage you to use your own language, and to recognize that the style of your delivery is more important than the words anyway. Words are important, of course, and many people do stumble over vocabulary. Often, however, clients tell us clearly how they feel about a particular situation, and then ask "What shall I say to the person?" Our answer: "The same thing you just told me!" Dr. Suzette Haden Elgin, in her very popular series of books on "Syntonics" -- The Gentle Art of Verbal Self Defense and its sequels -- likens effective interpersonal communication to ~~tuning~~ tuning a musical instrument. You have a standard to work toward (a tuning fork, for instance), and you must gradually adjust your tone to equal that of the standard. Like wise in communication, you can ~~best~~ achieve your goals best by being in harmony -- syntony -- with the other person linguistically. Your words and your non-verbal style can be fine tuned until they match well with those of your listener. One of the techniques of syntonics is sensory mode-matching -- which involves recognizing and adjusting to the other person's sensory preference among seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting. Thus, one person may say, "I see what you mean..." while another means exactly the same thing when she says, "I hear you..." Syntonics is a creative synthesis of the work of the late family therapist Virginia Satir with the process of Neuro-Linguistic Programming. The idea is to help us learn to "read" our audiences and to communicate verbally and non-verbally in ways which will encourage them to respond positively to our messages. Used carefully and ethically, such procedures can be valuable tools in improved communication. (Needless to say, of course, there is plenty of room for abuse here!) One further word about content. Psychologist Donald Check, a neighbor and former University faculty colleague of ours, writing about assertiveness from an African-American perspective, pointed out the need to adapt assertiveness to your cultural setting. Particularly for minorities who may find themselves in "survival" situations, he suggests that what you say must take into consideration to whom you are saying it. Language which would be interpreted as assertive within one's own subculture, for example, could easily be interpreted as aggressive by "outsiders." The issue is remarkably complex however. For example, cross-cultural research on facial expression suggests that different aspects of expression are both universal

and culture specific. Individual differences may be greater than differences between cultural groups! We do not advocate that you change yourself to adapt to whatever any situation seems to invite. Nevertheless all of us do deal with individuals differently depending upon our respective roles and the perceived "power" of others over us. We hope you can be yourself; honesty remains the best overall guide. It is not usually the content that hangs people up. It is the anxiety, or the lack of skills, or the belief that "I have no right." -- We hope this chapter has caused you to think more systematically about your own self-expression, and to formulate some goals for your own work in advertising. To improve your familiarity with the components, and to relate each one more directly to yourself, we suggest you take a few minutes right now to assess your own strengths with this exercise: On a blank sheet in your log, draw eleven lines across the page a half-inch or so apart (if your log is too small, use a couple of pages). Label each line with one of the components described in this chapter (eye contact, facial expression). Divide each line into six segments (place a small mark in the middle then use similar marks to divide each half into thirds) at the top of the page, near the left end of the lines, write "I need work." At

Here's a sample:



rate yourself.