

How to be Assertive, Not Aggressive, at Work

Are you reluctant to speak up when you're being treated unfairly at work? You don't have to suffer in silence. You can learn how to assert yourself without jeopardizing your job.

"Assertiveness isn't complaining about what you don't like, it's requesting what you would like," says communication expert Sam Horn, author of *Tongue Fu: How to Deflect, Disarm and Defuse Any Verbal Conflict*.

Seek balance

Many employees can't decide about when it's appropriate to speak up. They have mixed feelings. "Am I being selfish?" "Do I have a right to complain?"

"When people don't speak up, it's because they really don't have clarity about their right to speak up," states Mr. Horn. "You can get clarity in making the decision about when it's appropriate to speak up by picturing an old-fashioned scale of justice with its two interconnected scales."

Because the scales are connected, when you put a weight on one it goes down and the other one rises. The success of any relationship depends on whether the scale is kept in balance.

Therefore, if managers think only of what they want and disregard the needs of employees, over time it will be an unequally weighted relationship. Likewise, if employees think only of their own wants and not what the company needs, the scale also will be unbalanced, and it won't be an effective relationship.

For example, a typical complaint of employees is being asked to work overtime. If it's a one-time request or an unusual occurrence, the scale will still be in balance, and it's appropriate for you to go along with the request and stay late, even if it's inconvenient, without speaking up about it.

If it's an ongoing occurrence, however, and you're continually being asked to work overtime, then the scale gets outweighed on the manager's side, and it's appropriate for you to speak up for yourself.

Avoid aggressive language

An aggressive person will attack using "You" language. "You're asking me to work late all the time and it's not fair." "You should be more considerate." The word *You* makes it attacking, aggressive language.

Use assertive language

Instead of complaining about the past and what you don't like, Mr. Horn suggests you use these three assertiveness strategies:

1. Use the word *I* instead of *You*.
2. Focus on the future.
3. Request or suggest what you would like.

In one sentence state the facts, and then state what you want. Use the word *and* in your sentence as a bridge to what you want in the future, instead of the word *but*, even though it may seem awkward to you. The word *but* is adversarial and invites an argument.



Here's an example of an assertive response to the overtime situation: "In the past couple of weeks I've been asked to work late several times, and I was happy to do that because I understood that we were short staffed, AND starting next week I will be coaching my daughter's little league [or other reason], and I will need to leave by 5:30."

"By being assertive, you're not attacking the person or selfishly asking to leave early," says Dr. Horn. "You're keeping your service to others and yourself in balance."

Always speak up

Not speaking up and hoping the situation will get better is a losing proposition.

"If you're unhappy about a situation, and you haven't spoken up about it, you're equally responsible for it," says Dr. Horn. "By using assertiveness techniques, you can stand up for yourself without stepping on toes."

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