

Say it loud, say it clear

We spend most of our lives talking, but do people really understand what we're saying?

BY LIFE COACH, ANNE STOCKS



Many of us have a huge capacity for talking – to our friends, our colleagues, our children and our long suffering partners. We just love chatting! Sometimes we forget that although social chit-chat is good for the soul, it does not always translate into clear expression of our feelings and expectations. We don't always adapt our natural flow of chatter to the situation, and we wonder why our good intentions blow up in our faces, leaving us feeling even more misunderstood and frustrated than before.

We communicate with those around us to fulfil a need, or express a feeling or idea. Effective communication exists when the other person interprets our message in the way we intended.

Unfortunately, we often read underlying attitudes and emotions in what people say, which may or may not have been intended. Others may hear us whining, complaining or nagging when our intention was to express our feelings in a positive way. Only 7% of the message people pick up comes from our words! The balance of their understanding of what we are saying comes from our tone of voice, facial expressions and body language.

There is also a common tendency to assume other people, especially those closest to us, know how we feel and therefore know how they should treat us. We feel hard done by, angry, hurt or rejected when they don't magically give us what we want or behave in the way we think they should. If we communicate our feelings and ask for what we want effectively, we have a far better chance of being understood and getting what we want.

“We communicate our feelings and ask for what we want effectively, we have a far better chance of being understood”

How do you generally communicate what you want and how you feel? You're probably be aggressive, passive or assertive in your approach. There are advantages and disadvantages of each behaviour type and although we tend naturally towards one of these behaviours, we have elements of all three in each of us.

Aggressive behaviour involves demanding what you want, often at the expense of the other person's feelings and needs. The aggressive personality wants to win at all costs, and generally will come out tops in a battle of wills. They can be very successful individuals but in the long run they can alienate people with their domineering personality and lack of regard for others.

At the other end of the spectrum is passive behaviour. This is how the “nice” person behaves, the person who never says “no” in order to avoid conflict at all costs. The result is that they generally get the short end of the stick and can be taken advantage of by others. The passive personality succeeds in avoiding conflict by giving in to more forceful people. However, in doing so, they often fail to fulfil their own needs, which can lead to frustration, anger and loss of self-esteem.

Assertive behaviour involves expressing your needs while being respectful of others and their needs. The assertive personality always looks for a win-win. They stand up for their own rights, without denying the rights of others. They communicate their wants, dislikes and feelings in an open and honest way, but without threatening others. This means they maintain good relationships, while at the same time making progress towards fulfilling their own needs.

Assertive behaviour is generally a positive choice but not in every situation. A self-aware person is able to pick the most appropriate behaviour for the situation and is prepared to accept the consequences. An assertive person will probably get more of what they want than a passive person would, but they will need to negotiate and compromise in the process.

Assertiveness Formula

The key to assertive communication is clear, open and honest discussion that does not blame another person or put them down. A useful technique for communicating your feelings and asking for what you want is the Assertiveness Formula. The Assertiveness Formula uses “I” statements as opposed to “You” statements. “You” statements, such as “You always do that...” are generalisations and sound attacking or nagging, so should be avoided or you will put the other person on the defensive.

Assertiveness Formula:

- * I feel... (Describe your emotion)
- * when... (Focus on the behaviour)
- * because... (Reason for your feelings)
- * So please... (Your preferred outcome)
- * What do you think? (Ask their opinion)

An example might be: “I feel hurt when you interrupt me while I am speaking because it feels like what I have to say is not important to you. So please let's both make time to listen before we have our say. What do you think?”

This formula is not just about expressing your needs and emotions but also helps open the door to compromise, as you show willingness to be part of the solution.

The Assertiveness Formula can

also be adapted to give positive feedback. For instance, you may want to acknowledge your husband for his help, so you could say “I feel loved when you help out with preparing the children's meals because it takes the pressure off me and allows us extra time to relax. Thank you!”

As you practice using this way of expressing yourself you will find it easier to personalise it to suit your style. Don't worry if you feel you are being aggressive at first! Others may not respond positively to you at first if you have always been passive with them. You can't control the response of others but you can control your actions and behaviour. Your reward will be more time for yourself, stronger relationships with your partner, family, friends, co-workers and your children. Your self-esteem will grow and you will gain the respect of others. Your life will feel more balanced and satisfying, and isn't that something worth working towards! ■

tips for developing assertiveness

- * Think about what you want and whether it is fair.
- * Discuss your needs and feelings clearly, openly and honestly.
- * Stay calm while talking about how you feel
- * Use “I” messages rather than “You” messages.
- * Negotiate and be willing to compromise.
- * Stick to the facts and avoid manipulative or judgemental language.
- * Be aware of your body language, tone and facial expressions.
- * Learn to say “no” in a polite and assertive way.
- * Be open to new ways of thinking about yourself, others and situations.
- * Give compliments to people and accept any you are given.
- * Be open to fair criticism and don't be afraid to make fair criticism yourself.