

Developing Assertive Communication

Natalie B. Davis ACC

The ability to communicate one's needs, feelings, thoughts, and ideas with confidence while respecting the needs of others is an essential communication skill to use. The benefits of assertive communication include feelings of confidence, reduced stress, and more effective problem solving. By using assertive communication techniques the activity professional can gain respect within the healthcare team. An awareness of your thoughts and feelings and how you convey these to other people is the first step in developing assertive communication techniques. Are you passive, aggressive or assertive in your day to day dialogue with people in your work environment?

Assertive communication differs from both passive communication and aggressive communication. People with a passive style of communication frequently do not ask for what they need, put the needs of others before themselves, have difficulty saying "no" and feel they will be well liked if they accommodate the needs of others. Typically passive communicators show stooped posture, hesitant speech, make little eye contact and ask for acceptance. The following examples show typical responses from a passive communicator. Each example uses language that is not direct and shows a lack of confidence. A passive communicator is sometimes described as "wishy-washy."

- "I think that would work, don't you?"
- "I'm not sure, but perhaps this would work."
- "Do you think I could do it this way?"
- "I will try to do it."
- "I could possibly get it to you by tomorrow. Would that be OK?"
- "Maybe we could do this _____."

People who use aggressive styles of communication routinely express their needs and ask for what they need, but, without acknowledging the needs of others. This communication style is judgmental, accusatory, overbearing and usually considered pushy. The body language of an aggressive communicator may be tense, with pointing hands movements, darting eyes, loud tone and rigid posture. The aggressive communicator frequently uses the word "you" and places the blame or responsibility of the action on the other person. The following are examples of aggressive communication and invade another's boundaries.

- "Did you do what I told you?"
- "Why didn't you have the time to do it?"
- "Here are assessments for you to get done today."

Handling situations is a way that meets your own needs while recognizing the needs of others is assertiveness. It is respectful, honest, dialogue that communicates your feelings and ideas in a relaxed, confident manner. People who use assertive skills ask for what they need. They say "NO". Assertiveness also includes setting limits on what is expected, taking responsibility for our actions and listening actively to the perspectives of others. Assertiveness involves showing appreciation for others.

Consider the following situation.

Your day is full. The July calendar is due by 5:00, the 4th of July event with parade, car show and cook out is just 2 weeks away. You have scheduled time to call and confirm the details. The daily activities must take place as scheduled. As you approach your office you are informed that 8 new resident activity assessments need to be completed by the end of the day, and you need to be available for a tour later this afternoon.

What is your response to this situation and others like this?

- Do you take on added responsibility, put off your scheduled tasks, take the calendar and July 4th planning home?
- Do you get angry and place blame on others saying “Why do you wait until the last minute to tell me things?”
- Do you state your feelings and priorities, and communicate how the added responsibility will impact the daily activity schedule and the calendar deadline?

Learning assertive communication techniques takes practice. To begin, it may be helpful to write out your responses or rehearse them ahead of time. Practice assertive responses to commonly encountered situations. Identify situations in which you are “wishy-washy.” Use the following techniques:

1. Use “I” messages. An “I” message is a statement that communicates the nature of the issue, how it affects you, how you feel about it, and what you want to change. Use of an “I” message lets you express your needs and feelings without placing blame on others. “I” messages look like this:
 - “I am frustrated that the invitations are not ready, I have time scheduled today to get them addressed and need to have them by 4:00.”
 - “I get upset when an activity does not begin at the published time. This impacts the quality of the department. I would like to know how I can help with this problem.”
 - “I feel frustrated when I am interrupted at team meetings. I feel like my ideas are not important and would like to share my thoughts.”
 - “I feel the planning part of this job is not fully understood. It will take 4 hours of planning time this week to complete the “Gold Rush Days” event. This is scheduled from 1-5 on Thursday.”
2. Use body language that communicates confidence. Make eye contact, stand erect with good posture, use a strong tone of voice and relaxed movements.
3. Use goal directed statements in your communication. Avoid words or phrases such as “sort of,” “kind of,” “possibly,” “could be,” or “try to” “hope to” or “would like to.” State your needs in declarative sentences, not as a question.

“I will be out of the office recruiting volunteers on Monday, additional assistance will be needed to gather residents for morning exercise.” NOT “I am trying to get more volunteers, do you think I could go to a volunteer meeting on Monday?”
4. Begin statements with the message, do not use “qualifiers.” Avoid the use of introductions such as “this may be irrelevant but.” or “I hate to interrupt but,” or “I’m not too sure but,”

Assertive communication will enable you to better express your needs and feelings while being aware of the needs of others. Assertiveness does not always guarantee that you get what you want, it does mean that you can express your views and be respected for your opinions.