**COMMUNICATING ASSERTIVELY**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Do you ever feel uneasy when you need to refuse requests and say *no,* disagree with someone, listen to criticism, ask someone to perform a favour, or clarify a question or instruction? If so, you could benefit from behaving more assertively, at least in some circumstances. However, before you start, you should appreciate the difference between passive, aggressive, and assertive responses. The following table differentiates these three communication styles.

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| Passive communication | Aggressive communication | Assertive communication |
| Does not express their concerns or opinions even when appropriate | Interrupts or speaks at the same time as other people | Listens genuinely but expresses concerns or opinions when suitable |
| Yields to the opinion of other people | Dismisses the opinion of other people | Communicates their needs or opinions calmly and honestly |
| Considers only the needs or opinions of the other person | Considers only their own needs or opinions | Considers the needs and opinions of other people and themselves |
| Often speaks softly | Often speaks too loudly | Speaks at a typical conversational tone |
| Often speaks meekly | Often speaks angrily | Often seems friendly but firm |
| Averts gaze from other people | Stares at people | Maintains eye contact but averts gaze sometimes |
| Slouches and withdraws | May cross arms; may stand too close to other people | Maintains a natural but proud posture |
| Seldom fulfils their goals | Often fulfils goals but does not maintain trusting relationships | Often fulfils goals and maintains trusting relationships |
| **Examples** |  |  |
| Ignoring a text | Calling a someone a derogatory nickname | Disclosing to someone you feel hurt by one of their comments |

Some people demonstrate a blend of passive and aggressive behaviour. They do not overtly express their concerns or opinions—but deliver subtle or indirect insults. For example, after a conflict with a friend, a person might write on social media “I can’t believe people can be so stupid”. This comment only indirectly implicates the friend.

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| **Did you know?** | When people inhibit the temptation to lie—such as refrain from the tendency to exaggerate or excuse some mistake—their health and wellbeing tends to improve. |

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| **How to say no: Refusing requests** |

Many people do not like to say *no;* they do not like to refuse requests. If asked to complete an errand, even when busy, they might relent rather than refuse. If asked to attend an event they would not enjoy, they might yield reluctantly.

Sometimes, people need to yield to these requests. For example, to maintain their job, they might need to please an unreasonable manager. On other occasions, people might relent, even when they would benefit from refusing. Thus, many people need to say *no* more often than perhaps they do. To achieve this goal

* The first column in the following table presents a series of unhelpful assumptions that many people believe—assumptions that might deter you from saying no. Insert a tick alongside assumptions you might believe occasionally or extend this list with other assumptions.
* In the second column, indicate the likelihood these assumptions are true. That is, are these assumptions very likely, somewhat likely, unlikely, or a worst-case scenario?
* In the third column, on a scale from 1 to 10, indicate the extent to which you feel these assumptions will affect you five years from now. For example, if your refusal seems rude, to what extent will this perception matter in the future.
* In the fourth column, specify whether a friend would also support these assumptions. If not, would what they believe instead?
* The final column presents some arguments or principles that counteract these assumptions. You could either support or improve these counterarguments.

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| Assumptions that  deter refusals | Likelihood of this assumption | Effect on the future | Perspective of a friend | Counterarguments |
| I am perceived as rude if I refuse a request |  |  |  | If expressed properly, refusals do not seem rude |
| Refusals are unkind; people feel rejected |  |  |  | Other people often accept refusals more readily than you assume |
| If I refuse, people will not like me |  |  |  | People often feel that refusals show integrity and thus can improve trust and relationships |
| Good people do not say *no* |  |  |  | You cannot relent to every request: If we say yes to one person, we often need to say *no* to another person |
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After completing this exercise, you may feel more inspired to refuse requests and say *no* in the future, when appropriate. You might, however, not be proficient at this task. To improve your capacity to say *no*, first recognize you can adopt a range of approaches. For example, you can demonstrate empathy—a behaviour that increases the likelihood your response will be trusted. The following table summarises and illustrates each approach. In practice, you will often utilize more than one approach at a time.

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| Approach | Example |
| **Delay**: You could, if applicable, indicate you might be able to fulfil this request in the future. If you offer a specific date, week, or month, your refusal tends to seem more credible | I cannot complete this task this month; would I be able to complete this task next month instead? |
| **Alternative**: You could seek alternatives to this request that you would be willing to fulfill—in essence, a compromise | I cannot write a comprehensive report this month. Could I instead write a summary now and then extend this report later? |
| **Justify**. Communicate reasons to justify your refusal. Start with the most important reason. Only communicate the main reasons; trivial reasons can diminish the credibility of your arguments | I cannot attend this event, because my first chapter is due that day. |
| **Empathy**. Show you understand why you feel this individual presented this request, but then utilize one of the other approaches to refuse. If you demonstrate that you adopted the perspective of someone else, this person is more likely to trust your response | I understand why you wanted me to attend this event; you need someone to help. But, I cannot attend this event, because my first chapter is due that day. |
| **Direct**. If you do not want to maintain a relationship with this person, you could be more direct and merely state you cannot fulfill this request. If challenged, simply repeat this refusal. | * You: “I cannot complete this task” * Other person: “But nobody else can” * You: “I cannot complete this task” |

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| **Homework** | Consider the circumstances in which you might need to refuse a request. Imagine responding to these circumstances. Practice your responses in a mirror |

When utilizing these approaches, you should consider several principles.

* Remember a time in which you felt proud and helpful; these feelings tend to diminish the emotions that generate inappropriate responses
* Delay your response for as long as possible—perhaps several seconds, minutes, or hours depending on the circumstances.
* Differentiate the response you would like to express from the response you feel is fair
* Some people feel the need to justify themselves extensively. They continue to speak unnecessarily. Instead, your answer should be brief.
* When they refuse a request, some people feel awkward and thus speak too quickly. Their response, therefore, often seems rude. Instead, do not speak too quickly
* When they refuse a request, some people feel uneasy and, therefore, inflate or concoct excuses. Instead, attempt to override the temptation to answer insincerely.
* Refer to your emotions, if relevant. You might state “I’m feeling torn: I think I should help but I feel inundated”.

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| **Homework** | In the future, after you observe occasions in which someone else refuses a request, record what you did like or not like about their behaviour? |

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| **Responding to criticisms assertively** |

People will occasionally criticize your decisions or behaviours. Some people respond inappropriately to criticisms. They might respond defensively and aggressively—a response they might regret later. Or, they might respond too passively or submissively—a response they feel dents their sense of dignity. The following table outlines three strategies you could apply instead.

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| Strategy | Example |
| **Strategies to utilize if the criticism is, to a significant degree, true** |  |
| Agree with the criticism, but limit the criticism to a specific behaviour. | If someone asserts that you are selfish, you could reply “Yeah, last week, I probably was too preoccupied with my own worries”. |
| Agree with the criticism wholeheartedly and describe your plan to address this concern. | You might reply “I definitely agree that I can be selfish. So, I have decided to volunteer in a soup kitchen each month partly to gain perspective on my problems |
| **Strategies to utilize if the criticism is, to some extent, true but exaggerated** |  |
| Agree with the criticism, but indicate the problem might not be important enough to address vigorously. | You might reply “I agree I do speak too quickly. But, because people often understand me, I am not sure whether the effort to change is worthwhile”. |
| Ask the person why this issue bothers him or her to this extent | You might reply “But why exactly does this behaviour bother you to this degree?” |

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| **Homework** | Identify 5 people in your life who might criticize you. Imagine yourself utilizing one of these approaches |

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| **Expressing your concerns** |

Sometimes, you might feel the need to criticize someone else. For example, someone might have offended you or committed an error. The following table outlines some of the strategies you should utilize or shun in these circumstances.

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| Strategy | Example |
| **Suitable responses** |  |
| Refer to your feelings or intuitions. That is, refer to the word “feel” and then describe an emotion. People are more likely to trust someone who refers to complex emotions | “I felt uneasy when you did that” |
| Refer to a specific behaviour rather than an underlying trait. People are not as offended by criticisms that are relevant to specific events only | “I felt upset when you raised your voice” |
| Refer to your feelings rather than blame the other person, sometimes called I-statements |  |
| Specify the behaviour you would prefer | “I would like you to speak more gently in the future” |
| Your tone should be gentle but firm |  |
| **Unsuitable responses** |  |
| Do not imply your criticism is a fact | “This behaviour is wrong” |
| Do not imply the person is immoral or inadequate | “You are aggressive” |

Compared to the suitable responses, the unsuitable responses are too forceful. In response to forceful criticisms, people tend to become defensive. They attempt to defend themselves rather than embrace your words. These principles can often be reduced to a simple script

* When you [describe the behaviour you did not like, such as speaking loudly]
* I felt [describe the emotions you experienced, such as apprehension]
* If you instead [specify which behaviour you would prefer, such as speaking gently]
* I will [specify your response to this preferred behaviour, such as accommodate their needs]

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| **Homework** | Imagine criticizing someone who has either offended you recently or committed some error. Practice these strategies |

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| **Adjusting your posture, mannerisms, and behaviours** |

In general, when people feel confident and secure, they are more likely to behave assertively rather than passively or aggressively. Sometimes, to foster this confidence and security, you merely need to adjust your posture, mannerisms, and behaviours. You might, for example, straighten your back. The following table presents posture, mannerisms, and behaviours that foster confidence as well as posture, mannerisms, and behaviours that dent confidence.

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| Enhancing confidence | Denting confidence |
| Straighten your back while speaking to other people, but naturally rather than excessively | Slumps in a chair, stands hunched, or seems too stiff |
| Sit close to the most senior person in the room | Sits away from the more senior or central people in the room |
| Sit close to the centre of a group; people in the centre of a group tend to be perceived as more significant | Sits towards the edge |
| Adjust your chair so that you sit as high or higher than everyone else; people who sit higher tend to be perceived as more important | Sits lower than other people |
| Maintain some eye contact when speaking to other people, but avert your gaze at least occasionally | Maintains eye contact only fleetingly. Or stares at a person excessively. |
| Shake hands firmly and over a reasonable duration | Shakes hands limply, fleetingly, or excessively |
| Use gestures to a moderate extent | Does not shift hands and arms at all or uses hands and arms excessively |
| Speak marginally, rather than conspicuously, louder than you might naturally | Speaks too softly or too loudly |
| Arrive to meetings or discussions with documents or notes you have prepared and organized | Arrives with no materials or disorganized materials |
| Demonstrate some initiative; you might introduce yourself to other people or open a conversation, but in a friendly manner | Waits for other people to introduce themselves or start a conversation |
| Ask questions to prompt the other people to present their perspective and then listen genuinely and actively; ask questions and nod your head to show you are listening | Speaks prematurely, perhaps before listening to the perspective of other people |

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| **Homework** | Each day, practice one of these mannerisms or behaviours that enhance confidence. Or, attempt to memorize as many of these strategies as possible. Test your memory the next day and one week later. |

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| **Common circumstances** |

To communicate assertively, you need to contemplate how you might respond in various challenging circumstances. You should then practice these responses. To help you in this journey, the first column in the following table illustrates some typical scenarios in which you might need to behave assertively. The second column illustrates some typical answers.

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| Common circumstance | Sample answers |
| You disclosed a secret about one friend to someone else. Your friend is angry with you. How do you respond? | * Acknowledge your error: “I was wrong to breach your trust” * Explain your error: “At the time, I felt the other person would benefit” * Express your feelings: “But I do regret that I told her” * Consider a redress: “I would like to make it up to you” |
| You need to speak to someone at an event who is busy in another conversation. How do you respond? | * Watch the conversation whether or not a brief interruption would be acceptable * Interrupt briefly with “When you’re available, can I speak to you about something”. * If possible, imply the topic or urgency: “Someone is crying about a problem” |
| You now realize you did not understand the instructions that a teacher, lecturer, or manager conveyed. How do you respond? | * Acknowledgement your embarrassment but with confidence. “I’m embarrassed to ask” * Invite the person to repeat the instruction. “Can you clarify the instructions again” * Explain why. “I must have been distracted” |
| You feel that another person is mistreating one of your friends. How do you respond? | * Describe how you adopted the perspective of your friend. “While watching the conversation yesterday, I imagined how I would feel if I was the other person” * Describe your feelings: “I think I would have felt very upset” * Prompt them to contemplate their intentions: “I assume you didn’t intend to hurt them though” |
| You friend wants to participate in one activity, and you want to participate in another activity. How do you respond? | * Assume you will perform both activities at some time: “Let’s assume that we will complete both activities” * Decide which activity is best first: “So how should we decide which activity is best now” |