

# Skillbook

# Assertiveness

Communication  
Skills



**Mindtools**

# Assertiveness

## Skillbook

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# 1. Introduction

**A**ssertiveness is the art of communicating your wants and needs clearly and confidently, in a way that is neither aggressive (angry or hostile behavior) nor passive.

If you have difficulty being assertive it can make you feel powerless or ineffectual, and unable to stand up for yourself.

It can also cause you to miss out on opportunities for personal satisfaction and career progression.

Developing assertiveness starts with self-confidence. Being able to recognize your own self-worth, and understand that you deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, will enable you to confidently stick up for your rights and protect them.

When you communicate assertively, you act fairly and with empathy, not with aggression, bullying or passivity. This takes precision and balance, as well as a strong belief that your rights and needs are as valid as everyone else's.

It's not always easy to be assertive, but it is a skill that can be learned.

In this **Skillbook** we'll show you how you can develop assertiveness by:

- Defining what assertive behavior looks like, and its benefits.
- Identifying how assertive you are.
- Exploring a variety of different assertiveness techniques.
- Learning how to use the LADDER technique to be more assertive when you communicate.

These exercises should help you to identify areas where you feel that you are not assertive enough, and give you the tools to address them. They should also help you to feel more confident, and give you a renewed sense of who you are and what you stand for. Most importantly, you will know how to get what you need from now on – in a fair but firm way.

## 2. What Is Assertiveness?

**A**ccording to the [Merriam-Webster](#) dictionary, assertiveness is the use of “bold and confident statements and behavior.” However, it’s not always easy to identify assertiveness. This is because people often confuse it with aggression.

People who behave aggressively are only concerned with their own self-interests and will do whatever is necessary to achieve them – regardless of other people’s wants, needs and feelings.

In contrast, if you act assertively, you balance your wants and needs with those of others. You get your point across firmly, fairly, and with empathy.

For example, if your boss places a pile of work on your desk the day before you go on vacation and demands that it gets done straightaway, then they’re acting aggressively. This is because they’re disregarding your wants, needs and feelings.

An assertive boss would have dealt with this situation very differently. They would have asked whether you could fit any of the work in before your vacation, or would have delegated it to another team member entirely. They understand that the work needs to be done, but don’t use pushy or bullying behavior to achieve this.

While aggressive people can use their power to get others to do what they want, this kind of behavior will unlikely serve them well in the long term. A team member might carry out the demands of an aggressive manager, but it’s unlikely that they’ll be prepared to do so for long. They’ll likely be on the lookout for a new job, and they definitely won’t respect or admire this kind of manager.

### Why Be Assertive?

If you fail to assert yourself properly, by being too passive or too aggressive, it can take a heavy toll on your mood. You may find that you:

- **Feel depressed or hopeless.** Your inability to express your feelings might make you feel as though you have a lack of control over your own life.
- **Have low self-esteem.** Not speaking up for yourself can cause you to think negatively about yourself.

- **Have angry outbursts.** When you don't express your feelings, they can build up inside you and explode without warning.
- **Feel resentful.** If you're too passive you might find that people begin to take advantage of this, making you feel used and taken for granted.
- **Have poor relationships.** If you act aggressively, people will likely avoid you, and you may earn a bad reputation. On the other hand, acting too passively can mean that people overlook you or even ignore you entirely.
- **Feel anxious.** You might find yourself avoiding situations that involve confrontation and public speaking.
- **Experience physical illness.** Non-assertive behavior can lead to low self-confidence, stress, and anxiety. [Research](#) suggests that this can result in serious physical health issues, such as heart disease and high blood pressure.

## The Benefits of Assertiveness

Assertiveness has several benefits. It can boost your self-confidence and self-esteem, by giving you a better understanding of who you are, what you want, and the value that you offer.

Other benefits can include:

- **Improved leadership style.** An [assertive leader](#) gets things done by treating people with fairness and respect, and is treated by others in the same way. They inspire positivity and loyalty in their people and are seen as leaders that people like and want to work with.
- **Increased ability to negotiate “win-win” solutions.** A person who is assertive is able to recognize the value of other people's opinions and feelings. This helps them to find common ground with their opponents and reach solutions that work for everyone.
- **Improved problem-solving skills.** Assertiveness empowers people to take ownership of the problems that they encounter, and to take charge when decisions need to be made.
- **Lower anxiety and stress.** An assertive person is self-assured and confident in their ability and value. They don't feel threatened or victimized when things don't go as planned.

### 3. How Assertive Are You?

**B**efore we begin exploring some of the techniques that you can use to develop your assertiveness, it's useful to identify how assertive you are already. So, in this chapter, we've included some exercises that will help you to do this.

The first exercise is a quiz, which will help you to determine how assertive you are now. The second exercise can help you to drill down into the situations where you find it most difficult to be assertive.

#### Exercise 1: How Assertive Are You?



##### Action:

Work through the quiz on the next page. For each statement, check the number in the column that most applies to you.

Be as objective as possible. Think about how you actually are (rather than how you think you should be) and don't worry if some statements seem to score in the wrong direction.

Statement	I tend to think like this...				
	Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
1. When someone points out a mistake that I've made, I get defensive or upset.	5	4	3	2	1
2. When faced with an aggressive, opinionated person, I maintain my point of view.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I stand up for myself when someone in authority is rude or unreasonable.	1	2	3	4	5
4. When I need help from a colleague, I ask for it directly rather than staying quiet or hinting.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I find it hard to refuse a request without feeling guilty or that I'm a failure.	5	4	3	2	1
6. I can accept my own mistakes and imperfections.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I worry that I will seem stupid, incompetent or annoying if I ask questions.	5	4	3	2	1
8. I recognize when I'm being treated unfairly and speak up for myself when this happens.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I'm confident about the decisions that I make.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I can present my ideas and points of view confidently to a group of people.	1	2	3	4	5

Now, add up all of the numbers that you've checked to calculate your score, then write it below:

**Score** \_\_\_\_\_



Score	Comment
10-23	You'd likely benefit from being more assertive. You may also want to work on your self-esteem, so that you understand your needs and wants, and feel that you deserve to have them met.
24-37	You can assert yourself in certain situations and with certain people, but you're not always confident when you do it. This means that people may not always know what to expect from you – will you “tell it like it is,” or will you “beat around the bush”?  You should look in detail at what situations you find most difficult to be assertive in, and ask yourself why. Learning some assertiveness techniques will likely help you to take control of these situations more confidently.
38-50	You're very assertive, and you feel good about knowing what you want and getting it. Others respect you for your straight talking, and people know that you will always be honest and fair with them.

## Exercise 2: Identifying Your Problem Areas

To become more assertive, you first need to identify the situations where you find it most difficult to assert yourself. For example:

- Addressing large groups of people.
- Talking to people in senior positions.
- Flagging a mistake that you've made or noticed someone else has made.
- Dealing with a conflict of opinion.
- Sticking up for yourself when someone is being rude or unreasonable.
- Saying “no” to people.
- Asking for help when you're not sure what to do.
- Making decisions and sticking by them.

It's also important to look at the impact that avoiding being assertive has in these situations. In some cases, it can have serious repercussions.

For instance, if you fail to flag a mistake that you've made, it could lead to serious consequences for your business, such as the loss of a client. Or, if you fail to stand up to someone, it may lead to bullying or harassment.



### Action:

In the first column of the table below, list the situations where you find it difficult to be assertive. Then, in the middle column, write down the consequences that your non-assertive behavior has (for instance, if you feel overloaded with work because you find it hard to say “no” to your boss).

Finally, in the right-hand column of the table, write down the reasons that you find it difficult to be assertive next to each situation. For instance, you might feel as though you can’t say “no” to someone because it makes you feel guilty, or because you feel it’s your duty to always say “yes” to that person because they’re more senior than you.

The Situation	The Consequences	I find it difficult to be assertive because...

An important part of being assertive is knowing what your rights are and protecting them. This sounds simple, but it can be very hard to put into practice. After all, we're taught from a young age to respect others. But we can sometimes find it hard to respect ourselves.

This means that we can occasionally neglect our own rights, or put others' rights above our own in the belief that we're being respectful and polite.

You might, for instance, believe that saying "no" to someone when they ask you to take on extra work makes you seem selfish or rude. But, if you have a good reason for doing so – for example, you're currently working on a number of other, high-priority tasks – then it's crucial that you say so in an honest and firm way.

For this reason, it's important that you clarify your rights in these situations. Doing this will enable you to feel more confident the next time a situation crops up in which you need to assert yourself.



### Action:

Based on the situations that you identified in the table on the previous page, take some time to think about what your rights are in each. Then list them in the table below.

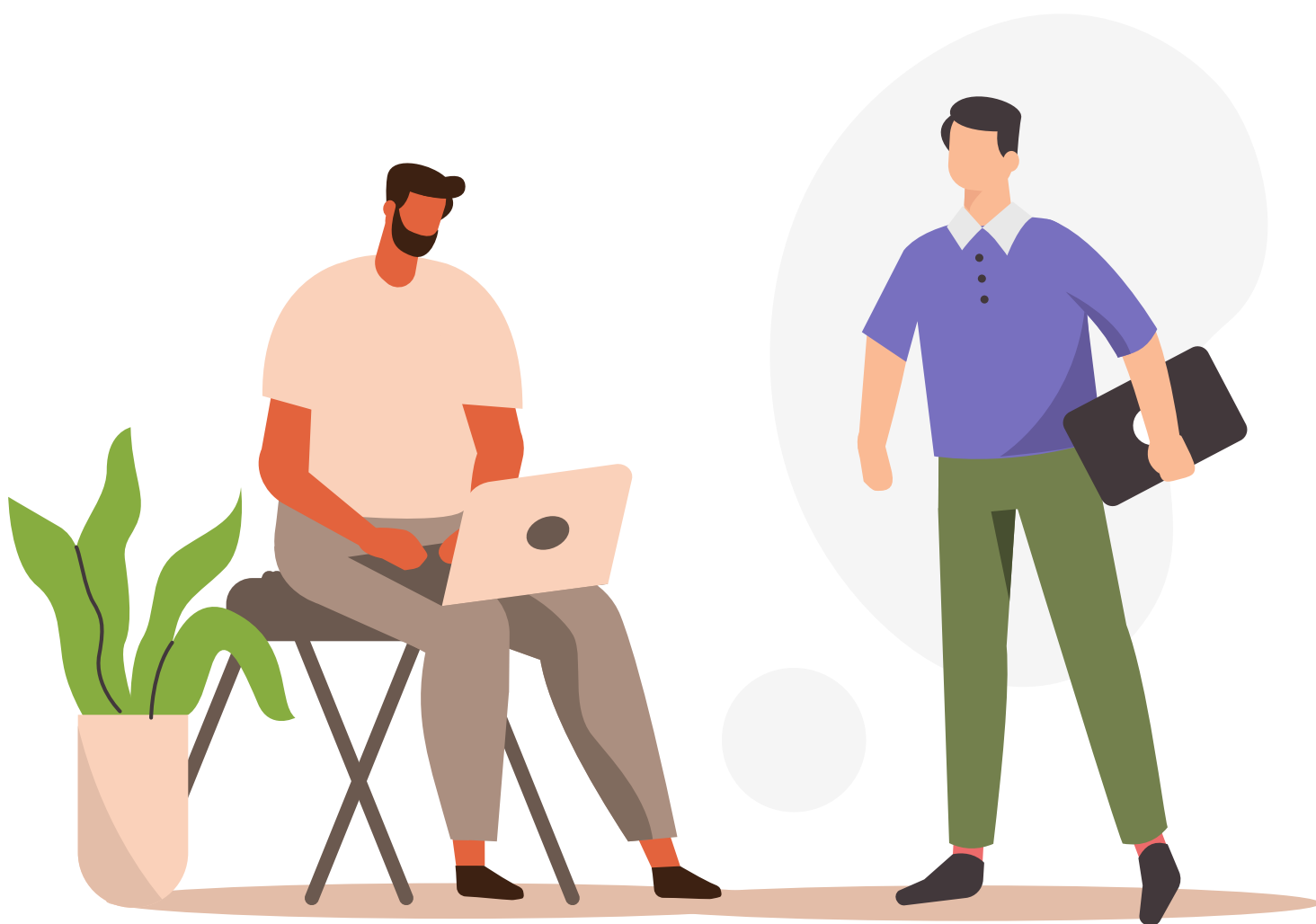
Some ideas to get you started include:

- I have a right to... say "no."
- I have a right to... ask questions that I don't understand.
- I have a right to... express my honest opinions.
- I have a right to... make mistakes.
- I have a right to... ask for help.

Your Rights	
I have a right to...	
I have a right to...	
I have a right to...	
I have a right to...	
I have a right to...	
I have a right to...	

By this stage, you should start to feel more empowered. These exercises will hopefully have helped you to identify the situations that you find most difficult to be assertive in, and to clarify what your rights are in these situations.

In the next chapter, we look at specific techniques that you can use to become more assertive.



## 4. Assertive Communication Techniques

**A**ssertiveness is more than just telling someone what's on your mind. You need to be able to express yourself in a way that they can understand, so that they feel validated and positive about the final outcome.

In this chapter, we look at some of the practical techniques you can use to become more assertive. This will help you to communicate your wants and needs firmly and fairly, in a way that also respects your colleagues' wants and needs.

We will cover these eight techniques:

1. Sending a clear message.
2. Using direct language.
3. Listening with empathy.
4. Being a "broken record."
5. Scripting.
6. Saying "no."
7. Being open to feedback.
8. Escalating matters.

### 1. Sending a Clear Message

To get your needs and wants met, it's vital that you get your message across as clearly as possible.

For instance, if you want to achieve a particular goal and need help to do it, tell your boss or your colleague exactly what it is that you want from them in a clear and confident way. Be direct, and try to avoid "sugar coating" your message, otherwise people may fail to understand what you're saying.

Use confident body language when you address people. For instance, look them in the eye when you're talking to them, maintain good posture, and keep your voice calm and level.

And stick to your guns. Even if what you want isn't possible right now, ask (politely) whether you can revisit your request in six months' time.

At the same time, it's important that you find ways to make requests that avoid sacrificing other people's wants and needs. Remember, you want people to help you, and asking for things in an overly aggressive or pushy way is likely to put them off doing this, and may even damage your relationship.

## 2. Using Direct Language

Language can be a powerful tool for asserting yourself. And there are a number of simple but effective ways you can change your language so that it's more direct – for example, by using “I” statements, and changing the verbs that you use:

### Use “I” Statements

Use statements like “I want,” “I need,” or “I feel” to convey your basic assertions and to get your points across firmly. For example, you could say “I feel strongly that we need to bring in a third party to mediate this disagreement.”

### Change Your Verbs

Use verbs that are more direct and definite when you assert yourself. This will help you to communicate your message clearly.

Use verbs such as:

- “Will” instead of “could” or “should.”
- “Want” instead of “need.”
- “Choose to” instead of “have to.”

For example, you could say:

- “I **will** be going on vacation next week, so I **will** need someone to cover my workload while I’m away.”
- “I **want** to go on this training course because I believe that it will help me to progress in my role and my career.”
- “I **choose** this decision because I think it **will** have a more successful outcome than the other options we’ve considered.”

## 3. Listening With Empathy

While it's vital that you assert your wants and needs firmly, you also need to do so in a way that's fair and doesn't encroach on the wants and needs of other people. Remember, your rights, needs and desires are just as important as everyone else's, not **more** important.

So, once you've stated your case, it's essential that you let the other person speak – and acknowledge their viewpoint.

Give your full attention to them and be empathetic to their situation. Not only will this help you to gain a better understanding of their viewpoint, but it will signal to them that you value it as well.

## 4. Being a Broken Record

If you've stated your point of view, but still feel that people are ignoring it or misunderstanding it, you could try using the "broken record" technique. This involves restating your message using the same language until the other party is clear that you really mean what you're saying.

Below is an example of how you might use the broken record technique in a conversation with your manager:

Manager: "I'd like you to work on the Clancy project."

You: *"I can't take on any more projects right now."*

Manager: "I'll give you overtime if you do it."

You: *"I'm sorry, but I'm very busy with other tasks. I can't take on any more projects right now."*

Manager: "Seriously, this is really important. We need to get it done by the end of the week."

You: *"I can't take on any more projects right now."*

A colleague: "Will you do it as a personal favor?"

You: *"I'm really sorry. I value our relationship but I simply can't take on any more projects right now."*

### Tip:



Be careful of how you choose to use the broken record technique. If you're using it to protect yourself from exploitation, then that's good. But if you use it to bully someone into doing something for you or taking action that's against their own interests, it can be manipulative and dishonest.

## 5. Scripting

Scripting is a useful technique for expressing your feelings clearly and confidently. It allows you to plan what you want to say in advance, using a four-pronged approach to a situation:

### 1. The Event

Tell the person exactly how you view the situation or problem. For instance:

*"Alex, we're way below our targets this month because you failed to submit your work on time. You didn't give me any indication of this, which meant the news came as a surprise."*

## 2. Your Feelings

Describe how you feel about the situation and express your emotions clearly. For example:

*“This frustrates me, and makes me feel that you don’t understand or appreciate how important it is that you flag up any difficulties that you’re having with your workload.”*

## 3. Your Needs

Tell the other person exactly what you need from them, so that they don’t have to guess, and they clearly know what they should do from now on. For instance:

*“I need you to be honest with me from now on, and let me know when you’re having problems managing or prioritizing your workload so that we can find a solution together.”*

## 4. The Consequences

Describe the positive impact that your request will have on the person and the organization. For example:

*“If you do this then we’ll be in a good position to hit our future targets and get a better commission bonus.”*



### Action:

Think about a situation in which you find it particularly difficult to express and assert your feelings. Then, use the table on the following page to plan out what you could say in this situation to get your point across more clearly using the scripting technique.

Describe the event, as well as your feelings, your needs, and the consequences.



Script Section	Description
1. The Event	
2. Your Feelings	
3. Your Needs	
4. The Consequences	

## 6. Saying “No”

If you’re going to be truly assertive then you need to be prepared to say “no,” no matter how difficult you find it. Remember that you can’t possibly do everything or please everyone all of the time, so it’s vital that you protect your time and your workload by saying “no” when you have to.

A good way of dealing with situations like this is to try to negotiate “win-win” solutions that work for everyone.

For instance, if you’re asked by someone to take on some additional work but don’t think you have the time, think about whether it could be passed to another team member instead. Or, give the person a clearer idea of your availability – perhaps you could fit it in next week or next month.

Not all requests can be negotiated. Sometimes your only option is to say “no.” If this is the case, ask yourself the following questions before saying “no” to the task:

- Do I have time to do it?
- How urgent or important is it?
- Am I the right person for the task or is someone else better suited to it?
- Does the request fit with my core responsibilities, goals and objectives?

If your answer to any of these questions is “no,” then you may be best off saying “no.” But remember that it’s unprofessional to say “no” to a task simply because you don’t want to do it, you don’t understand how to do it, you think that it will take a long time, or it’s messy and complex.

## **7. Being Open to Feedback**

Assertiveness doesn’t automatically guarantee that you’ll get exactly what you’ve asked for. The other person may have criticism or feedback that they need to share with you, or that they want you to address, before giving you what you want.

It’s important that you accept any positive or negative feedback that you receive graciously and humbly, and that you use it in a positive way going forward.

However, if you don’t agree with the criticism that you receive then you need to be prepared to say so. But remember to remain as objective as possible and to use evidence-based responses. Try to avoid getting defensive or angry, otherwise you may weaken your argument.

## **8. Escalating Matters**

If your first attempts at asserting yourself have fallen flat, then you may need to escalate the matter further. This means becoming a little bit firmer (though still polite and respectful) with the person you’re requesting help from.

You need to make it clear what your next steps will be if they continue to ignore or dismiss your request.

For example, you might say, “Bruce, this is the third time this week that I’ve had to talk to you about arriving late. If you’re late one more time this month, then I’ll need to activate the disciplinary process.”

However, be aware that regardless of how assertive you are, you may still not get what you want. If this is the case, you need to follow through on your warning – for instance, by setting up a formal meeting to talk about the problem, or escalating your concerns to your Human Resources (HR) department, or your boss.

## 5. The LADDER Technique

**A**nother powerful assertiveness technique that you can use is the LADDER framework. It's a comprehensive technique for resolving problems.

The six stages of LADDER are:

- L** Look at your rights, wants, needs, and feelings. And establish a goal that you want to accomplish.
- A** Arrange a meeting with the person that you need to talk to about the situation.
- D** Define the problem. And be specific!
- D** Describe your feelings. Use direct language, such as "I" statements and verbs such as "will," "want," and "choose to."
- E** Express what you want clearly using verbal and non-verbal language. Stay aware of your posture, eye contact, tone of voice, and facial expression.
- R** Reinforce the mutual benefits of your solution.

In this chapter, we look at how to put this technique into practice by going through each "step" of the LADDER mnemonic.

### Action:



Think about a time when you felt frustrated or disempowered because your voice wasn't heard. Why do you think you lacked influence? What did you do about it?

### Description of Situation

--



### Action:

Now use the table on the following page to plan out how you could respond to the situation that you've described, using the LADDER technique.



<b>L: Look at Your Rights</b>	<b>Details/Description</b>
What do you want/need?	
How will this help you?	
<b>A: Arrange a Meeting</b>	<b>Details/Description</b>
Date and time of meeting:	
Deadline for final decision:	
<b>D: Define the Problem</b>	<b>Details/Description</b>
Summarize the issue that you need to address:	
Is there any evidence that you can use to support your case?	
<b>D: Describe Your Feelings</b>	<b>Details/Description</b>
How do you feel about the situation?	
What “I” statements can you use to describe your emotions?	
<b>E: Express What You Want</b>	<b>Details/Description</b>
I want...	
I need...	
Is there a “win-win” solution that benefits everyone?	
<b>R: Reinforce the Mutual Benefits of Your Solution</b>	<b>Details/Description</b>
How will your solution benefit you?	
How will your solution benefit the other person?	

Once you’ve put together your assertive plan of action using the LADDER approach, practice what you intend to say in front of a mirror, or with a trusted friend. Ask for feedback, and improve your message and delivery until you’re confident in what you’re saying – and how you’re saying it.

## 6. Key Points

**W**hen you're assertive, you're able to communicate your wants and needs in a way that's firm and fair, without being too aggressive or passive. And you remain respectful of the wants and needs of others.

Assertiveness is a difficult skill to learn, but with time and practice you too can learn to master it. There are a number of assertive communication techniques that you can use to help you to do this. These include:

1. Sending a clear message.
2. Using direct language.
3. Listening with empathy.
4. Being a "broken record."
5. Scripting.
6. Saying "no."
7. Being open to feedback.
8. Escalating matters.

You can also use the LADDER mnemonic to help you to address a problem assertively.

Becoming more assertive has a number of benefits. The primary advantage is that it can help to boost your self-confidence, but it can also make you a more-effective leader, improve your negotiation and problem-solving ability, and reduce anxiety and stress.