Asking assertively

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Know what you want from people at work, but not how to get it? Learn how to talk the talk, and frame your requests assertively.

Most of us are comfortable being assertive in some situations, but not others. This article is for people who find it difficult to be assertive when making requests.

Feeling awkward about “telling people what to do” is one reason why you might struggle to frame assertive requests. You might not want to seem bossy or overbearing, you might feel nervous about directing people who are older than you, or you might think that your life will be easier if you’re seen as a good sport. In other words, you might make requests in a passive manner.

Passive communicators often come across as nice people; however it is easy to ignore their requests because of the self-effacing, indirect manner in which they tend to make them.

If you are passive, you might find that:

- Other people do not take your requests seriously;
- You have to repeat requests several times before they are acted on;
- You are not respected; or
- People are confused about what it is that you want them to do.

On the other hand, you might feel that the only way to get people to do what you need them to do is to “come down on them like a tonne of bricks”. Communicating aggressively might help you convince people to comply with your wishes (unless of course you encounter someone who is more aggressive than you!) but it is unlikely to contribute to positive relationships, or a good working relationship.

If you are aggressive you might find that:

- People agree with you to your face but do not really take your request on board;
- People are not open or honest with you, so you miss out on valuable information;
- You are not respected; or
- You are frequently involved in unhealthy workplace conflict.
Passive or aggressive approaches to making and responding to requests can both cause real difficulties. Learning how to make requests in an assertive manner is worth your while.

Ten steps to assertive requests...

1. **Prepare.** If need be, spend some time beforehand thinking about what you are going to say. Consider how you might be misinterpreted, and come up with a strategy to communicate your message clearly.

2. **Actually make a request.** This might seem like a no-brainer, but it is easy to think that you’ve asked for something when you’ve really just talked around it. Don’t beat around the bush. Clearly and specifically state what you want.

3. **Use an appropriate tone of voice.** In most instances, it is appropriate to speak respectfully and firmly, using the mid-register of your voice.

4. **Be succinct.** People are more likely to remember requests if they are specific and short. You don’t need to spend a lot of time justifying yourself.

5. **Invite questions.** Clarify that the person you’re speaking with has understood what you’re asking of them, and invite them to raise any queries they have on the spot.

6. **Be clear.** Phrase your request in language that the person you are talking to will understand. Avoid industry jargon, particularly when making requests of workers. Worker advocates have told us that employees and claimants sometimes say “Yes” without really understanding what it is they have agreed to do. This causes problems for everybody down the track.

7. **Don’t assume knowledge.** Give as much information as necessary to avoid confusion.

8. **Be aware of your own assumptions and expectations,** and how these might differ from the assumptions and expectations of the person you are communicating with. For example, differences in age, gender and country of origin can lead to differences in communication styles. Make sure that the content and tone of your request is appropriate for the person you’re talking to.

9. **Pay attention to how you are feeling.** Your emotional state will influence how you communicate, and thus how the person you are communicating with responds to you. If you are feeling angry or vulnerable, consider if you might be better off delaying a difficult conversation.

10. **Practice and monitor** your progress towards assertiveness. It takes time to hone any skill set, and assertive communication is no different. It might be effective to ask yourself whether you’d feel comfortable being spoken to in the manner that you use. Watch how people react to you. Do they listen respectfully, or can you see them becoming anxious, withdrawn or angry? Moderate your approach accordingly.

For more information about passive, aggressive and assertive communication styles, see this RTWMatters article.

Some of the information above comes from this MentalHelp.net guide.
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