

ISSUES OF ASSERTIVENESS AT WORK

Anna GEMBALSKA-KWIECIEN

Silesian University of Technology, Organization and Management, Economics and Informatics Institute;
Anna.Gembalska-Kwiecen@polsl.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-9275-0447

Purpose: The paper deals with the issues of assertiveness at work. Assertiveness can have a positive impact on work efficiency and employee motivation. First of all, if employees' needs are defined in a clear and specific way and their opinions are taken into account, it increases their self-confidence and belief in own abilities. This often arouses admiration and respect among co-workers. Responsible assertiveness also ensures positive interactions in the workplace. The purpose of this paper is to highlight this very important problem.

Design/methodology/approach: Literature research of the subject was carried out.

Findings: One of the priorities in shaping desired organizational behaviors is developing responsible assertiveness among employees. One can say that assertiveness is tantamount to balancing on a thin line that separates what is good and comfortable from what others expect. Being assertive means standing up for your values and clearly defined needs. However, while respecting others' attitudes. It's definitely not an easy skill to acquire, that's why many employees learn and improve it throughout their lives. That is why it is so important to raise this topic and provide professional support in this area.

Practical implications: The issues discussed in this paper significantly affect the improvement of methods related to workplace management, the desired shaping of employees' attitudes and behavior regarding the approach to the problem of assertiveness at work, a problem related to work environment that has been downplayed so far.

Originality / value: A holistic approach to the issues of assertiveness at work. Defining it as an interdisciplinary problem. Making it clear that the problem should be dealt with by specialists in various fields, theorists and practitioners. It requires the attention of specialist practitioners, including psychologists, psychotherapists and physiologists as well as specialists in occupational medicine.

Keywords: Management, assertiveness at work, human factor.

Category of the paper: review paper.

1. Introduction

Very frequently, one can hear the opinion that assertiveness is tantamount to refusing, the difficult art of saying “no”. However, this is quite an oversimplification. Refusing to help someone in a way that lacks respect and understanding for the other person is definitely closer to ignorance or arrogance and has little in common with the properly understood assertiveness. A person tending to behave like this is rather considered to be conceited and cheeky rather than assertive. And as we know, relationships based on mutual respect are particularly important in the workplace, where they provide the basis for professional success and a friendly organizational culture (Griffin, 2002; Zaborowski, 1985; De Drue, Gelfand, 2006; Killoren et al., 2015).

Herbert Ferenstein – a psychologist and co-author of assertiveness theory believed that: “If you are in doubt whether specific behavior is assertive, check if it increases your self-respect even a little bit”.

It should be noted that assertiveness, which is largely associated with refusing, is also the ability to express our needs. However, employees are often afraid to be assertive at work. You may ask why this is the case? This may be the case, because assertiveness is not taught at home very often, and disobedience is associated with lack of being liked. It is believed that refusal may result in unpleasant consequences, loss of being liked, and perhaps even lack of promotion or losing a job. However, it should be noted that assertiveness can have a positive impact on performance and motivation at work. First of all, if our needs are defined in a clear and specific way and our opinions are expressed in the same way, we increase our self-confidence and belief in our own abilities. This often arouses admiration and respect to us among co-workers. It also facilitates positive interactions. You may have the impression that when we express a different opinion, it will have unpleasant consequences. However, if our opinion is substantively justified and the statement is not aggressive, it will certainly be appreciated by a wise employee group.

But when are we actually assertive? Not only when we say “no”, but also when we say “yes”. It's about living in harmony with yourself, not being ashamed of what you need and want, but at the same time being aware and respecting that other people also have their needs.

Assertiveness at work is about showing that we set our boundaries without crossing other people's borders. This attitude creates the golden mean between being decisive and being submissive. Aggression, taking offense, excessively emotional reactions, automatically agreeing or denying the opinions of others are typical for unassertive people (Reiman et al. 2019; Søk, 1988; Mansfield, 1995).

2. Literature review

Assertiveness is a psychology term that means the ability to refuse and freely express one's opinion, criticism, emotions and needs. Assertive persons communicate with other people in a direct, open and honest way – so that when expressing opposition or their own opinion not only defend their rights, but also respect the rights of others.

In other words it is the ability to behave at the same time maintaining self-respect and showing respect for others. This is the ability to behave in a non-aggressive way, without causing suffering to others or yourself. One can say that an assertive person is guided by the following motto: “Your rights and needs are as important as mine. If there is a conflict between us, let's get to know each other's points of view and respect them as well as their possible differences. Let's work out the best solution for both of us and maybe we will learn something important in the process. It will be great, if we can find it. If not, that's too bad, at least we will know that we have tried our best and we will all act in harmony with each other” (Stoner, Wankel, 1997; Gros, 1994; Townsed, 1996; Witkowski, 1994).

It is important to know that assertiveness is an acquired skill – this means that no one is born naturally assertive, each of us develops this skill better or worse during our relationships and interactions with other people. People vary greatly in their ability to be assertive and often develop into being overly submissive or demanding of others. Definitely, people who can be assertive are more satisfied with themselves, their relationships with other people and generally enjoy better mental health. To a large extent, this is because they can take care of what is important to them without compromising the people around them. At the same time, they are often much more respected, appreciated and liked by others than non-assertive people.

An assertive person can talk to others and clearly state what his needs, possibilities, and limitations are. The difficult part is not agreeing to something that is uncomfortable for us, but in a polite and non-confrontational way. However, accepting praise and appreciating your own successes can also be a challenge – not everyone can do it! Finding the golden mean between protecting yourself and caring for the feelings of others is just what the assertiveness is all about. Therefore, assertive persons are not just the ones who keep saying “no”. At the right moment, they can say “yes” and accept a compliment, praise or celebrate their personal success. It is very important to be able to keep balance and harmony.

One can say that assertiveness is tantamount to balancing on a thin line that separates what is good and comfortable for us, from what others expect from us. Being assertive is nothing but standing up for your own values and needs, but at the same time respecting the attitudes of others. It's definitely not an easy skill to acquire, that's why many of us learn and improve it throughout their lives (Knight et al., 2010; Søk, 1991).

Assertive persons:

- skillfully and clearly formulate their thoughts, opinions, wishes, requests,
- accept criticism without getting offended,
- listen to others and respond appropriately (do not offend or force people to change their minds),
- are resistant to pushing, external pressures, including the expectations of others,
- can admit a mistake and apologize,
- can ask for help when they need it,
- control their emotions – this does not mean that they are deprived of them,
- have high self-esteem, self-confidence and self-concept,
- protect their own good and care for the good of others,
- can say “no”,
- have the ability to be firm,
- have the ability to work out compromises,
- have the ability to represent their own interests while taking into account the interests of others,
- accept their own mistakes and recognize successes,
- have the ability to claim and enforce their rights, respecting other people's boundaries.

Not everyone is born with a strong assertive attitude, but, as previously mentioned, it can be learned and developed.

Developing an assertive attitude requires:

- clear and articulate expression of thoughts and feelings – opposition when something is uncomfortable and should not be done, even if there is pushing and pressure from some other person,
- opposing attitudes that are bad for the employee, harmful, uncomfortable, arousing fear or anger,
- preparing and presenting arguments in a substantive way – why a given person should change his or her behavior, what specific consequences he or she faces if he or she does not do so, this is absolutely not about intimidating others,
- appreciating oneself, improving self-esteem and self-confidence,
- enjoying even small achievements and successes,
- accepting own mistakes – only the ones who do not take such actions do not make them,
- asking for help if needed,
- accepting compliments and praise, not diminishing one's merits (Chrapieńska-Krupa, 2024; Telzer, Fuligni, 2009; Olszewski, 2000).

3. The process of developing assertiveness

Assertiveness can be actively developed in many ways, including with the help of a psychotherapist or psychologist. By participating in various types of courses or trainings to develop and at a later stage, to maintain the assertiveness. One can also use the professional literature in the form of various types of guides available in libraries or bookstores as a support.

The process of developing assertiveness should at first start with diagnosing the causes behind it. What is the problem with not being able to express our needs or opinions on a given topic? These may include our beliefs about ourselves, other people, and the assertive attitude itself. They are often created at an early age through experiences and messages from people in our immediate environment. If we used to hear that our needs and opinions were not important, or we were punished for expressing our emotions or for not agreeing to something, this could of course have an impact on our behavior in adult life. Of course, the reasons behind the problem of lack assertiveness in adults are much more complicated, may consist of many components and experiences that we have gone through at various stages of our development.

Below we present the most common myths about an assertive attitude that lead to not expressing one's own needs.

If you are assertive:

- other people will not like you,
- you will be perceived as conflictual,
- other people will not respect you,
- you will be perceived as selfish,
- you will be perceived as aggressive,
- with such an attitude you will not get promoted,
- you can lose your job.

4. Assertiveness in the workplace

Most employees wonder about the level of their assertiveness. Can you say no to your superior or colleague? In such situations, you should demonstrate intuition and objectively assess the situation – are there really no favorable conditions to perform this task? Will the refusal result in negative consequences for the person refusing or for the organization? If the answers to these questions are “no”, then no problem – refuse duly justifying your decision. However, if the answer is yes, then you should address the problem with understanding and perform the assigned task within the expected time. Unfortunately, even in

companies with the most favorable organizational culture, sometimes there is simply no room for being opposed.

There are many people who find that it is okay to say no in any situation. While others say that it is not allowed at all. In order not to go to extremes, it is worth analyzing the situation carefully and answering a few questions before making a decision:

- How long will it take to complete the assigned task?
- Are we really able to help?
- Will this affect other obligations?
- Why was such a request addressed to me?
- Are there people in the company who are more competent and knowledgeable in this field?
- Is the person asking for help actually unable to complete the task on their own?

If, after analyzing the situation, it turns out that more facts give reasons for refusal, it should be given in a skillful manner. Of course, it is natural to worry about how to do it so as not to offend anyone or to go down in colleagues' estimation. Please note that just because you are unable to provide the support you have been asked for in a given situation, it does not mean that you will not be able to do so in the future. When refusing, you should first ensure that the interlocutor feels your good intentions and understands that he or she can ask for help again next time. It's also good if you can try to help at least a little, for example, by suggesting some different solution. This is this way we show concern and interest – then the co-worker will certainly understand our arguments and, despite our lack of help in a given matter, will end the conversation with a positive attitude.

It is natural for employees that they want to be liked and accepted by their colleagues and to enjoy the trust of their superiors. Therefore, at work you should try to be as helpful and proactive as possible. However, it is good to keep in mind that people value features such as honesty and consistency, which is why being in harmony with yourself is very important in professional life (Heimpel et al., 2006; Gembalska-Kwiecień, 2017; Ferguson, 2006).

5. Conclusions

The presented analysis and conclusions of an issue important for quality management sciences, namely the effective and final communication connection, which affects the entire process of providing public services. By summarizing everything that has been presented above about assertiveness in psychology we can say that assertiveness means expressing your thoughts, feelings and views while maintaining your own boundaries and respecting the borders set by other people. In his book “Perfect Assertiveness” J. Ferguson presents the 10 rights of an assertive person. We present them below.

The list of 10 rights of an assertive person, according to which everyone has the right:

1. to ask what they want – which of course doesn't mean they have to get it,
2. express their opinion, feelings and emotions – assertively, i.e. adequately to the situation,
3. not to be discriminated against,
4. to make decisions independently and bear their consequences,
5. to decide whether they want to get involved in other people's problems – they do not have to constantly sacrifice themselves for others,
6. to be able to make mistakes and learn from them without feeling guilty,
7. get what they pay for – when they buy something or use services,
8. to change their decisions – as you develop and learn, you do not always have to have the same opinion,
9. their privacy,
10. to be successful – you should not minimize your achievements, you should enjoy them (Zimmerman et al., 2015; Siwek-Ślusarczyk, 2024; Lis, 2024; Martyński, 2023).

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