

What it means to be an assertive leader

KEY WORDS

- » Aggression
- » Assertive
- » Emotional intelligence
- » Passivity
- » Self-esteem
- » Resilience

Leaders and managers of people need to develop emotional and psychological strategies for both self-preservation as well as to use in the management of their teams. A key strategy in self-management is to understand, if not be in total control of, ones emotional and psychological response to situations which occur in the workplace. In the last few papers in this leadership series, we have looked at what it means to be emotionally intelligent and emotionally resilient. In this paper we will look at one manifestation of being emotionally intelligent, that is being legitimately assertive. In the sense used here being assertive relates to the timely and measured use of language to ensure you, as a manager or leader get what you need from a situation, it does not, as so many managers seem to think, mean getting your own way at the cost of others — in that sense it is legitimate.

A common aim of many new nurse leaders is the desire to become more assertive in their dealings with peers and colleagues, especially those from other disciplines. In part, this stems from a common belief among nurses that other disciplines are more assertive and that nurses do not have the skills required to be more assertive; this is, of course, quite wrong. Learning to be assertive first of all means we need to understand the benefits being assertive brings and indeed what being assertive actually means. Like emotional intelligence, which can be learnt (Serrat, 2017), there is nothing stopping the nurse leader from learning to become more assertive.

WHAT IS ASSERTIVENESS?

First of all, it is worth asking the question what do we mean by assertive? Assertiveness is the ability to express oneself with clarity to other people in a variety of circumstances. Assertiveness is part of a continuum between passive and aggressive. Like all concepts that lie on a linear continuum, assertiveness is not one simple idea, it is a range of proactive and reactive communication-related behaviours. In this sense, we assert ourselves to a greater or lesser extent dependent on the situation and what it is we are trying to achieve. To assert,

therefore, is to make a choice about how to behave in order to gain a desired outcome, it is not just about being firm in order to get what one wants (*Figure 1*).

Definitions of assertiveness identify that it is both honest and legitimate and is used to express one's needs, wants and feelings (Alberti and Emmons, 2008). This is achieved without belittling the other parties involved in the communication and without the need to become aggressive.

Ames et al (2017) regard some behaviours, such as avoiding someone or accommodating their wishes, as belonging on a legitimate scale of assertive behaviour, because in some instances they are the right thing to do. That is to say, they achieve what you, as a manager, need to achieve there and then at that point in time in that interaction. Ames et al (2017) also regard being competitive or aggressive as part of the assertiveness continuum in the right circumstances because, again, they are actions used to gain the outcome the manager wishes to achieve.

The real trick as a manager is to learn which level of assertiveness is appropriate in what circumstances. Clearly as a clinical manager not exercising high assertiveness in an emergency situation might be to the detriment of the

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people involved in the emergency, while being over-assertive in breaking bad news might be damaging. Like much of leadership, the approach which is appropriate is situation dependent (Ellis, 2015).

So the classic idea of assertiveness is not something a manager needs to express all of the time. Some situations require a passive response and some an element of aggression, but both sit on the continuum of assertiveness. Being in control of yourself as a leader and exercising true assertiveness requires you to know what “voice” to use and when. It is more about exercising a conscious choice over the style of communication than it is always gaining the upper hand, getting your own way or appearing to know everything.

In this sense, assertiveness is a psychological muscle which when exercised correctly and with discretion will grow to become something useful not only to the manager but also the team. And like a muscle when applied incorrectly being under assertive won't get the job done and being over-assertive can be damaging.

WHEN TO BE ASSERTIVE

The circumstances in which one needs to be highly assertive are a good way of understanding what episodes of assertiveness look like; McCabe and Timmins (2006) provide some useful insights as to when one might need to be assertive:

- ▶▶ When expressing disagreement
- ▶▶ When providing criticism
- ▶▶ Sharing an opinion
- ▶▶ When saying “no”
- ▶▶ When listening to others opinions
- ▶▶ When making a request
- ▶▶ When making a suggestion.

We might also add to this list our example from earlier of needing to be assertive in an emergency situation. How do you as a leader know what level of assertion to apply? The simple answer to this is all of the time. If being assertive is about employing the right language and mode of delivery to fit the situation, then the manager who is focussed on the outcomes of the team needs to be assertive at all times.

The need to be firmly assertive will arise when the manager knows they need to say something which the other party will not like. It will be accompanied by a feeling of duty, even if the manager is a little uncomfortable, and the certain knowledge that the manager is doing the right thing, is being ethically active (Ellis, 2016).

WHY ARE SOME PEOPLE NOT ASSERTIVE?

Being positively assertive is not everyone's natural state of being and there are many reasons why people never start being assertive, stop being assertive or fail to be assertive at the right times.

Some leaders or managers lack the confidence to be assertive and since they do not act with surety this becomes a vicious cycle as staff and service users take advantage of a perceived weakness. If they have never exercised the assertiveness muscle it has never developed and so they are used to other people getting their own way because it is too hard for them, as the leader, to say no.

Some roles do not lend or historically have not lent, themselves to the person in them being assertive. Nursing is a good example where many nurses, even managers, feel overpowered by other professionals and fail to speak up when perhaps they should; although this is rapidly changing.

Some people who are usually assertive may stop being so when they are stressed or anxious. This may be because of personal circumstances or something which is happening in the workplace has overwhelmed them and impacted on their resilience. People who work with people are likely to experience stress and anxiety from time to time, especially in the caring professions where managers can be exposed to situations which are distressing. This does not make the manager unassertive, it makes them human.

THE IMPACT OF NOT BEING ASSERTIVE

Failure to be assertive in the workplace can have negative consequences for managers and their teams (Garon, 2012). Timmins and McCabe (2005) point out that failure to be assertive in the workplace as a nurse can impact on patient care.

Figure 1. The assertiveness continuum



Teams with leaders who do not assert what they want do not know how to act; this can lead to either inertia or chaos depending on the team.

Failure to let team members know what you want as a leader will cause others in the team to rise and state what they want; they will become assertive and over time this will undermine the manager. The problem with other people setting themselves up as the leaders is that they lack legitimate power, they may not see the organisational strategy and very often their behaviour will breed malcontent in the team.

THE BENEFITS OF BEING ASSERTIVE

Managers and leaders who are assertive, as described here, are better able to get things done at work because the people they work with understand what the manager wants and what is required of them to do it. Because being assertive is about reading situations to get the best from them, rather than competing with others, assertive managers make better negotiators. Assertive managers can appreciate what the other party need as well as knowing what they need and are capable of finding a compromise when it is needed.

Assertive managers who exercise emotional intelligence tend to do the right thing and do it the right way, this means they are at ease with themselves and what they do and are less stressed and anxious. Being assertive is good for the manager self-esteem and helps the manager gain respect from others (Clarke, 2012).

Service users and patients benefit from managers who know what they want and know how to achieve it by being assertive. They, like the team, know what to expect from the assertive manager who is consistent in their approach. This benefits the organisation, the team and the individuals involved.

CONCLUSIONS

We have seen above that assertiveness can bring many rewards for the manager and leader in the renal setting and that conversely failure to be assertive is detrimental. Some people mistake assertiveness for being the only tool they need and can take its use to the extreme as aggression. Other leaders and managers fail to exercise assertiveness which means the team do not know what is expected of them and therefore the work they undertake lacks purpose and focus.

In the next paper in this series, we will look at some of the strategies the manager can use in order to become more assertive in its positive sense.



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