

Learning to be an assertive leader

KEY WORDS

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

In the last paper in this series, we looked at what it means to be assertive and the benefits of being assertive for the leader, their team, and organisation, as well as service users. We also looked at when it is appropriate to be assertive and some of the pros and cons of being assertive as a leader. We discovered that being assertive is a continuum of behaviours from passivity to being very firm, but that at all times the assertive leader seeks gains without being rude or aggressive towards the other party – that is they are legitimately assertive. In this paper, we will explore some of the techniques that enable the leader or manager to become more assertive in their day-to-day leadership practice. As we have seen previously assertiveness, like emotional intelligence, can be learnt (Serrat, 2017).

Leaders who do not value themselves or what they are trying to achieve will be neither assertive nor achieve what they want. The basis of valuing self is the confidence one has in one's own ability and purpose. In part, this confidence arises from a belief in what the team and organisation, and whatever the team or the organisation expects from the leader.

When the leader believes in what they are doing, the confidence to do it follows and where there is confidence, there can be assertive behaviour. Belief in the purpose of the organisation and the team legitimises the leader's role in the team and helps them to understand that as part of the organisation, they are to be treated with dignity and respect as they view themselves as part of something bigger and more important than just themselves.

The down side to self-belief and self-confidence is that it can become arrogance if the leader forgets it is the mission and vision of the organisation that makes their actions important.

The key here for the aspiring leader is to look to the mission, vision and values of the organisation to remind themselves of the reason they are there, and the legitimacy of what they are doing (Jansen Kraemer, 2011). Good leaders look for people they can trust to tell them they have stepped out of line, and they cherish these relationships as a means of staying grounded. Being open to criticism means

the leader keeps an eye on what is meaningful and real in their work and can confidently assert what they need to get the job done rather than what they want to support their own ego.

LEARN TO SPEAK CONFIDENTLY AND POSITIVELY

Being assertive, as we saw in the last paper in this series, is about letting other people know what you want from a relationship without alienating them. Being a leader is about setting the tone and the direction of travel for the team. Put these two together, and you will see the leader needs to know what they want and be proactive in expressing it.

Being positive about what you want from others shows you know what you are about and it also takes the guess work out of action for them. This does not mean that the leader should belittle their staff; rather that they ensure the team know what outcome is to be achieved and are given the tools to do it.

Sometimes being assertive is about addressing a difficult situation, requiring the leader to be bold and firm. It is alright to be seen to be angry in some scenarios as long as the anger is used positively and not to belittle or be rude to others, but the leader must never be seen to lose their temper (Templar, 2003).

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Box 1. Key questions

1. What was it about the person's behaviour which cause you to want the conversation — did you read their intentions correctly?
2. What do you want to achieve from the conversation?
3. Ensure you are looking for a positive outcome or the conversation will be harder than it need be.
4. Are you the person with the issue here and is the fact you are wound up something to do with your prior experience.
5. Being empathetic – what is the other person thinking and feeling?
6. What common ground might there be as a basis for asserting something which is of benefit to both parties, the team and organisation?
7. Who has contributed to the problem and how?

RULES FOR BEING ASSERTIVE

So far the theory is all well and good, but what does this mean in actual practice? What does being assertive look like and what things might the leader say when being assertive?

As with all thing leadership, the assertive leader must understand themselves as well as others, this means being empathetic even when being assertive. See the situation from the other person's point of view and let them know; "I know this will be hard for you but I would like you to..." This conveys that you know how they feel, you have considered it and still you think what you are asserting is right. In their well cited paper, Mnookin, Peppet and Tulumello (1996) state that rather than being incompatible, the best negotiators and hence leaders develop both the skills of assertiveness and empathy.

Always use the word I. Stating that "I want", "I would like", "I need" shows the other party that what they are being asked to do is what the leader wants done. As the leader what you want done is important and to firmly state this is what is needed.

Don't be afraid of repeating and reasserting if want you want done has not be done. Sometimes people will resist the leader even when what they have been asked to do is clear. In these cases the assertion needs to step up a gear not only telling the person what you do or do not want, but also reminding them that they have been asked before; "this is the second time I have asked you to do this, I expect it to be done by the end of the week"

In this last example lies a clue to the next thing the manager needs to do when being assertive, be clear that what you are asserting is not optional. Change "could you please?" with "I expect you to" and "I would like" with "I want". Of course being polite remains important, but polite works very well alongside firm!

All of these techniques stand equally true on the occasions when the manager is asking someone to stop doing something or are resisting their own manager who is trying to get them to do something they don't want/have the capacity to do. Remember being assertive is about what you want as a manager no matter who you are talking to. Sometimes this will mean repeating yourself time and again until the other party, who may also be trying to be assertive, understands you are standing firm. This does not mean being childish or impolite it does mean restating your position in a slightly different way each time

while being clear and direct about what you want. Remember this is all about legitimate assertiveness.

PREPARING YOURSELF FOR A HARD CONVERSATION

Sometimes you know that you are going to face a tough conversation with someone in which you are going to have to assert yourself. When this happens it is wise to be prepared, practice what you might say, how they might respond and think about how this will make you feel. This allows you to rehearse the situation in a detached way so that when the conversation happens you can control your emotional response. You may want to practice with someone you trust, a mentor, supervisor or coach. Ensure that whoever you practice with has the experience to understand what you are going to face and the ability to be critical as well as supportive so that you are realistic in what you are setting out to do.

You may find that writing down what you are planning to do helps. In this case, as when undertaking a reflection, you will need to think about what might happen, how it will make you feel and how you will respond to the situation emotionally. This puts you back in control and will allow you to remain calm even in a volatile situation.

As a leader preparing for the assertive conversation, you need also to ask of yourself seven key questions before you meet with the other party, it might be helpful to write these down (*Box 1*).

Again if you are unclear about any of this ask a colleague who will be honest with you. Explore the issues and be honest with them about your motives or you may find your assertiveness backfiring on you as you either back down or see something through which you never meant to happen.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have looked at some of the techniques a leader or manager might use when needing to be assertive. We have looked at some of the behaviours they need to display in order to be authentic and legitimate in the exercise of assertiveness.

We have seen that being assertive is part of a wider suite of behaviours which the manager or leader should develop to ensure they get the best outcomes for themselves, their teams, organisations and ultimately their patients.

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