



ASSERTIVENESS TECHNIQUES

Listed below are summaries of standard techniques of assertiveness. They can be divided roughly into two categories:

1. Protective skills
2. Expressive skills

Some cautions are applied to the use of the protective skills:

- they can be overused
- used alone, they will not foster closer relationships between people
- being on the receiving end of one or two of these techniques can be very frustrating

Bearing these cautions in mind, you will find these skills applicable to a wide variety of situations of stress or conflict. As with the development of any new skill, these techniques will require practice. As well, you will need to gradually learn to discriminate when to use them.

SECTION 1. PROTECTIVE SKILLS

1. Broken Record (or Repeated Assertion)

This technique is appropriate when the other person over-reacts and ignores or discounts your thoughts, wants or feelings.

Rather than countering or arguing each discount by justifying personal feeling, opinions and wants it is usually more effective to firmly repeat the original point while still responding to legitimate points made by the other person. You ignore all non-relevant issues and criticisms that bait you or distract you from the main point. It is also useful when people won't take 'no' for an answer. This technique embodies the central aspect of assertiveness - being persistent without getting irritated, angry or loud.

The Broken Record technique involves your ignoring any extraneous issues brought up by the other person and returning to your original point. A standard phrase to learn is "But the point is....".

Six guidelines:

1. Select a short one-sentence refusal statement and use only that statement no matter what the other person says or does.
2. After each statement by the other person, say your broken-record sentence. Don't allow yourself to get sidetracked by responding to any issues the other raises.
3. Say it in a soft, calm, unemotional voice.
4. Don't 'attend' to the other person very well - it will only encourage him/her to keep talking.
5. Allow plenty of silence.
6. Persist. You must say your broken record one more time than the other person makes his request.

2. Disarming Anger

The Disarming Anger technique involves ignoring what the angry message is about and focusing your attention and conversation on the fact the other person is angry. You reflect the feeling the other person has eg. "I can see you're angry". You then apologise if you are wrong or have inconvenienced or hurt the other person. This should not be excessive though eg. "I'm sorry". You then describe your feelings about how the other person's comments affect you if they continue to be insulting or loud and aggressive eg. "it's not that I don't care about what's happened, but I find it very hard to cope with your insults". Finally, you suggest a solution merited by the problem eg. "let's see how we can improve the situation, perhaps by...". During all this you try to keep eye contact, use a moderate tone of voice, and you do not "put down" the other person.

- So
- i) reflect
 - ii) regret if warranted
 - iii) reveal
 - iv) resolve

3. Fogging (or Agreeing)

The Fog Technique is only used when you are being repeatedly nagged. The fog involves agreeing with any charges made and conditionally agreeing with any requests for action, ie. "I probably should...". This technique often causes the nagger to ask, "What are you doing?", at which time the asserter must tell the nagger that a technique titled the fog or agreeing is being used and explain it to the nagger. The fogger must then say he or she is willing to respond differently if the nagger is willing to try another way of getting the message across.

4. Content - Process - Shift

The Content - Process - Shift involves shifting the focus of the conversation from the content (or what the message is about) to some process (or what the message tone is) such as an emotion they are displaying such as frustration or to a process like the speed of their speech. The "reflect" part of Disarming Anger is an example of Content - Process - Shift.

5. Negative Assertion

This is used only when you have made an error. Negative Assertion involves clear admission of any mistake but you clearly separate the fact that an error has been made from any implication that you are a bad person or incompetent etc. It can involve direct confrontation such as “Are you saying that because I forgot to deliver one article, which I did forget, that I am not a good postman?” or can involve, “I did do it, I’m sorry, but I’m usually better than that”.

6. Negative Inquiry

This technique is used to terminate an aversive relationship. You respond to any criticism by asking the other person what else you have done that displeases the other. You assure the other that you wish to know so that you can do better in the future and when the person runs out of initial criticisms you summarise the list and say “Then of all the things I do, this, this and this displeases you.” You ask again if that is all. If it is not, you resummarise, and when the other person finally runs out of criticisms you thank him or her and tell him or her to be sure to tell you of anything else he can think of in the future.

7. Clipping

Clipping is a technique that is used when a criticism is delivered that the asserter thinks is true but not really a criticism. For instance, “This report looks like it was written by four different people”, when in fact it was. You as the asserter say yes or no as appropriate and then remain silent.

8. Selective Ignoring

This is the discrimination/attending and non-attending to specific content from the other person. You make clear to the other person that you will not reply to unfair or abusive criticisms but instead you will reply to statements that are not destructive, guilt producing or unjust. You remain silent in response to the unfair comments. It may be necessary to give a number of silences before a pleasant topic of conversation ensures.

SECTION 2. EXPRESSIVE SKILLS

1. “I” Statements.

“I statements / I feel....” The basis of this technique is to “stand on your feelings”. It is virtually impossible for another person to argue with or deny your feelings. Retorts by the other person are usually irrelevant and you can minimise them by calmly returning to your original statement with something like “yes all that may be so, but I still feel...”. Express yourself with a sentence beginning “I feel...” in preference to accusatory or threatening remarks. The technique uses statements rather than questions and it uses “I” rather than “you” to reduce defensiveness by the other person. A “you” question such as “do you love me?” or “you” statement such as “you always nag”, is often a coded message for hidden feelings.

2. Workable Compromise

This is a skill you can use whenever you feel that your self respect is not in question to allow you to negotiate for your goal or part of your goal when the other person is equally justified in seeking his or her goals or when the situation is beyond his or her control. If the goal involves a matter of your self-worth, however, there can be no compromise. As examples; you agree to what the other person wants next time; you offer to wait a definite period of time for your merchandise to be replaced or repaired; or you simply flip a coin to see who does what and when.

3. Collaborative Negotiation

The aim of this skill is to produce a win/win solution to a conflict in goals. The idea is not to lock into a position that obtains your goal. Mutually generate and explore a range of options that may get both party’s needs met. For example a couple going on annual holidays may have different goals: one may want to go to the beach and the other the mountains. Instead of comprising (e.g. going to the beach one year and the mountains the next) both sides needs were fully met when they came up with the idea of going to a beach/mountain resort on Hinchinbrook Island.

4. Broken Record or Repeated Assertion

As an expressive skill, this is used in maintaining persistence of unfulfilled requests. For example if you ask someone sitting next to you to stop talking during a movie you must be prepared to make the request at least two times. It is amazing how many requests are turned down on asking the first time and then agreed to on the second request.

5. Free Information

This skill covers unsolicited information given by you or picked up by you from the person you are with that can be used to start and maintain enjoyable conversations. It helps overcome those sometimes uncomfortable silences in conversation. Also it allows movement of conversation to content areas where maximum contact is made by both speakers.

A first step in Free Information involves asking open as opposed to closed questions. A closed question can be answered “yes” or “no” or answered by a single piece of information. Questions involving “where, when and who” are usually closed.

An open question is a question that seeks information beyond the specific content of the question. Questions stressing “what, how” and especially “why” are usually open.

A second step involves picking up on any free information that might be given by the other speaker. You can follow up on free information where the other person’s expertise seems to be greatest. When the other person offers free information it can be presumed this is a high interest area for him and following up on it should lead to a flow of information.

A third, and critical step is to offer free information about oneself. Not to do so will make you be seen as an interrogator. If the other person follows up any of your free information then the conversation has truly become communication and no further techniques are necessary for deepening social contact.

SAYING ‘NO’ WITHOUT FEELING GUILTY

Here are some of the many ways of saying ‘No’

Disagreeing With Others While Validating

“I see how you would think that...but it’s not how I see things...I still think that...”.

Reflective Listening, Then ‘No’

Reflect both the content and feeling of the request and then say ‘no’. “I can see why you’d be angry about the fact I won’t clean your ceilings for you, but I’m not prepared to do that”. You have the right not to give reasons for your choices.

The Raincheck ‘No’

You say ‘no’ to that particular request, but suggest you be asked again next time. “I can’t fit that in today but I could do it for you next week”.

Terminating Conversations

If you have tried some of the above techniques and the person continues to be manipulative, give them a clear warning that you will be terminating the conversation, in a certain amount of time and then do so, e.g. “I can only talk about this matter for another minute and then I have to get on with something else”.

