



Positive Assertion

STANDING UP FOR YOUR RIGHTS

Insights & Exercises

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Assertion and You

What is Assertiveness?

At its most basic assertiveness is simply about standing up for our own rights while at the same time not trampling on the rights of others. In order to make assertion a part of our everyday lives it requires some insight into our own sense of self and some practice. Before tackling these issues let's say something about what assertiveness isn't. *Assertiveness is not aggression*. Keep that in mind as you read - it's an important distinction.

If we fail to stand up for our own rights there are plenty of circumstances where people will ignore us. Nobody wants to be ignored, well not consistently at least, and sometimes this can lead to pent-up emotions and explosive outbursts. It's true that aggression can *sometimes* get us what we want but it is more likely to come at a cost. Aggression almost inevitably means violating the interests of others in the cause of self-interest.

Everyday Examples of Assertiveness

The list is potentially endless but here are just a few examples to measure your assertiveness against. Would you be prepared to:

- Go next door and ask them to turn their music down?
- Tell a waiter your meal is unsatisfactory?
- Return an item to a shop and ask for a refund?
- Admit you made a mistake?
- Confess that you've forgotten someone's name?
- Ask a stranger to get out of your reserved seat?

Now, you may be thinking that it all depends on the circumstances and you'd be right. When you speak to someone a great deal depends on who you have you ask, your perception of the likely reaction, whether they are your superior or inferior at work, and so on. It also depends on the circumstances as to how strong a case you feel you have and the likelihood of success.

A lot of people have fewer problems asserting themselves on behalf of others than they do for themselves. Perhaps, for example, you've held up a line of traffic because an elderly pedestrian is struggling to cross? This is partly because assertive behaviour is closely allied to our own self-image.

Those with a low self-image are pretty poor at looking after themselves whereas those with the most positive self-image tend to have the least difficulty with asserting themselves on their own behalf. Self-image is about how we see ourselves and the great advantage of learning a few assertiveness skills and putting them into practice is that it boosts both self-image and confidence.

So, before we go any deeper into assertion, we need to step back and consider what our self-image is about.

Our Sense of Self

We've all come across them. These are the types who profess not to care what

others think about them. In the majority of cases this is a bit of bravado. When it comes down to it we are social animals who fit into a world where it matters what others think of us. Most of us, without particularly thinking, frame our whole day around this very principle. The way we dress and the way we behave is all about social acceptability and fitting in. Indeed some people are so concerned about what others are thinking about them they become socially anxious. And what is social anxiety if not a fear of exclusion? It's that worry that others are judging us and evaluating us poorly. We all feel it to some extent but some feel it a great deal more.

Who Do You Think You Are?

Our beliefs about what others think of us is called our self-concept. This is shaped and developed from early childhood and follows us into adulthood. As adults we actually have a fairly stable view of ourselves and in most instances we expect other people to sense that same view. What is interesting is that in most cases they do. On average people will report a view of you that you yourself are portraying. But lets also consider those times they don't.

The way another person sees you is governed, in part, by their own self-concept. So, some people may view you with suspicion because that's how they view everyone. Some will like you immediately because they tend to view everyone as potentially likeable. In and amongst these are the socially skilled who mask their true feelings. These are the people who (possibly like you) put on a show of interest and enthusiasm, leaving you or others thinking 'they like me'. What you or others may not realise is the complete indifference they really feel.

Fortunately most people aren't like that and the fact is we just have to remain optimistic and press on. We've no real idea what another person is thinking and we can often only infer intentions once an interaction is over and we reflect upon it. Our sense of self, whilst fairly constant, can work for or against us in this

respect.

Controlling Perceptions

People who are very physically aware tend to have a keen sense of how they present themselves. Our physical selves are the observable parts of personality. In other words our voice, posture, clothes, the way we walk and behave. The more control we exercise over the impression we give the more accurate the perception of us becomes. If we're a person who frowns a great deal, or slumps in a chair it registers in the minds of those who meet us. We may not be consciously aware. Our minds tell us we are a certain kind of person, but our behaviour may not match that image.

Someone who needs a great deal of social approval will work hard to make a positive impression and nine times out of ten they will. What this boils down to is those who have learned to regulate their emotions are in a much better position to know what others think of them. The more our emotions get in the way and the less able we are to express how we feel the harder it becomes to interpret other people's responses to us. Learning to ground our emotions and calm ourselves in highly charged situations give us much greater control on our own and others' internal states. It's a win-win situation because the more accurate we are about how others perceive us, the better we fare socially.

Kept in Social Darkness

People who are socially anxious often send out messages that they prefer not to be spoken to. They may scowl a lot, throw around hostile glares, keep themselves to themselves. The result of all this is you never get to know what other people think of you. Actually, it may not be anywhere as negative as you suspect. You may simply be regarded as someone who likes to keep to themselves, and that's it. Others get part of the picture. Some people are

generally approachable but they become moody in the face of criticism, even minor criticism. Whether you become cross, or cry, or go off in a sulk the result will be that co-workers and friends will leave you to work things out for yourself - and perhaps you never will.

Shyness (socially anxiety to you and me) means you worry that you're not coming over that well. Truth is you may be right. If you're young and good looking a level of shyness can be quite endearing but it only takes you so far. Socially anxious people convey rather unflattering impressions of themselves and it's often not for the reasons they think. Other people often regard the detachment of socially anxious people as aloofness. A socially anxious person is so concerned about themselves that they often forget to engage with others to put them at ease.

Many socially anxious people would be mortified to learn they may be perceived as rude. Yet, because they worry that people are constantly judging them they actually *do* view themselves as being in the centre of interaction. They are so busy monitoring themselves and what's happening around them they lose all sense of spontaneity. Now here's the rub and it's a catch 22 if ever there was one. The fact that they prefer to ease back from offering an opinion or use the opportunity to deflect attention to someone else is viewed by many as quite attractive. The very techniques being used to push people away are drawing some in. You are viewed as someone who doesn't feel the need to talk about themselves or to hog the limelight. Quietly reserved people are often viewed as intelligent if a little aloof. It appeals to some and not others.

The Way Others See Us

*And would some Power give us the gift
To see ourselves as others see us!
It would from many a blunder free us,
And foolish notion:
What airs in dress and gait would leave us,
And even devotion!*

Robert Burns 1736

Robert Burns is said to have composed this verse after watching a louse make its way around the hat of a lady. Lice were common in those living in abject poverty but to the louse we are all equal prey. Burns muses on the possibilities of having the gift to see ourselves in the way other people do.

In fact the way that others judge us on falls roughly into visible and invisible categories. Of course other people notice our visible traits far more than we ourselves are able. It's hard to see our own twitches, rate of blinking, posture and so forth so this shouldn't be too surprising. What goes on inside our head is invisible is a different matter entirely. Interestingly even those with high self-esteem will tend to rate their own physical attractiveness lower than other people. It also applies to things like charm, which is itself a form of attraction, only not specifically physical in nature. What might be considered an invisible isn't always. That is to see people who know us the best get to learn when we're upset, worried and so on because they've learned the signs.

It's All About Balance

A degree of self-awareness is good but over-analysis can become paralysing. We need to accept a degree of trade-off between how much insight we want about ourselves and what makes us who we are, warts and all. We don't require an ongoing evaluation of every action or decision we make in life. Just occasionally it can be fruitful to have entirely accurate feedback as in those important life decisions such as career or marriage! Ideally we need the security that comes with being with people who love us for what we are but aren't afraid of saying how it is. This helps to keep us grounded or to reveal weaknesses we can choose to do something about.

Is Assertiveness Really Necessary?

A great deal depends on your view of assertiveness. You can be quite mild mannered and softly spoken yet still be an assertive and effective person. Assertiveness isn't about having a razor sharp wit, or having physical presence, it's about being you, perhaps with some tweaks with a few extra skills added to your repertoire.

Not being assertive leaves you vulnerable to the whims of others. At worst you become a victim of bullying. Not only will your own self-respect become eroded but others around you will have concerns over your dependability and reliability. It does nothing but harm to your emotional state. Some bottle up resentments and explode in a fit of anger. Some resort to passive-aggressiveness and some simply turn their frustrations, fear, anger and resentment inwards and become depressed. You may not get everything you want by being assertive but that's not what it's about. Assertiveness is holding the middle ground between aggression and non-assertion. It is quite simply the best of these two extremes and the best for your health and wellbeing.

When is Assertion Most Difficult?

We all use some measure of assertion without realising it. It really only comes to the front of our minds in situations that are difficult for us as individuals. The trick therefore is to stand up for our rights in circumstances we find hardest. Imagine a situation where someone keeps over-talking you in order to get the bosses attention. Do you politely sit back and allow them to dominate or do you interject? If you're halfway through a sentence there's certainly no harm in saying:

'I know we've all got things to say, but I'd like to finish what I'm saying.'

You may have to raise your voice but only do this enough to be heard. Don't ever shout as this will come over as anger and anger signals you've lost control.

In groups of people it can require a little persistence in order to get your point across. A simple technique known as 'broken record' is often useful. Broken record is simply a case of repeating your message until it becomes clear that it has been acknowledged. But there are pros and cons here. If you maintain your message you are essentially forcing people to pay attention. This may be merited in some but not all circumstances. Forcing people to pay attention can sometimes backfire and others may become more stubborn and refuse to give way. To use the broken record effectively it's often helpful to show empathy with other views being expressed in the room.

Sometimes assertion is needed when we are simply unclear about another person's motives or why they behave the way they do. The poorest response to perceived unfair or unreasonable behaviour is to moan about someone behind their back or sit on the problem with simmering resentment. Fear of approaching someone directly is usually based on some assumption about the negative consequences for ourselves. Assertiveness however, at least in this example, is

simply about seeking clarification. The purpose of your question is to convey interest rather than any aggressive agenda. *'Why did you do that?'* It's a simple question but it can be asked in a challenging or inquisitive way. Positive assertion will opt for the inquisitive option. That way you'll hopefully collect the information you need and the person you ask won't perceive you as a threat.

Getting The Upper Hand

Assertiveness doesn't necessarily equate with getting what you want. It's a useful tool that can be applied in a variety of circumstances but it doesn't guarantee behaviour change or a lack of frustration on your own part. Failing to get a change in someone's behaviour may lead you to making a decision that is essentially something of a last resort:

'If you continue with this the consequences for all of us and you in particular, are ...'

This spells out the negative consequences of a decision in no uncertain terms. If it becomes clear that behaviour still won't change your next recourse depends upon the situation. In a work setting, for example, you may decide to say you've been left with no option but to report/complain about the behaviour to a higher manager. It is a call only you can make but it impresses on the person that you feel so strongly about the issue that you mean business. To take the edge off aggression it's also important to offer a way out, perhaps via some kind of compromise.

There are usually differences in what might be regarded as the currency of assertion in your private life as opposed to your work life. The most you can probably expect in your private life is that your value as an individual is being acknowledged and that your feelings are being properly considered. At work your feelings come much further down the pecking order of priorities. Work is usually

about accuracy and implications. Confidence and assertion come as something of a package but confidence can be regarded as arrogance if it isn't moderated by some degree of empathy as to the effects decision making or other actions are having on other people.

Previously, I mentioned that a simple phrase can be verbalised in such a way as to convey entirely different messages, depending on the tone it is conveyed. Assertive messages depend upon removing potential distractions such as blame, threat or accusation. An assertive message requires you to use a steady voice and it can sometimes help to set the scene by weighting your voice with a slow opener such as;

'Y-e-s, well that's certainly one perspective'.

This acts as an indicator of your thoughtfulness and prepares the way for you to express your opinion.

Opinions

We're all entitled to our own opinions but in terms of assertiveness the way an opinion is pitched is important. Some opinions serve to make a statement and shut others down. *'Rubbish'* or *'you must be joking'*, are two examples. Over forceful or dogmatic opinions are invariably hostile. Sighing, tutting and rolling of eyes are all signs of passive-aggression, and saying nothing at all is the ultimate in non-assertion. In between these extremes is assertive opinion making. How do we recognise this for what it is?

- An assertive opinion will frequently recognise the fact that other opinions are equally worthy but certainly not more so than your own.
- An assertive opinion will be expressed in such a way as to make clear your opinion.

- An assertive opinion may also make clear your willingness to adapt or even change your perspective if a better case can be made, or you are willing to put your own views aside for a particular cause or unity.

Obviously anyone with opinions and a sense of self-regard will feel there are times they simply can't budge. Many of us have our line in the sand which we won't cross. Fortunately most people accept that compromise is a fact of life. Difficulties emerge with people who seem unable or unwilling to accept compromise. The danger for these people is they are seen as rigid and this can lead to them becoming more isolated and cut out of decision making.

Applying Assertion in Different Situations

Every social encounter has its unique issues, which are beyond the scope of this book to illuminate. However it is possible to give some examples of the important moments that can have an enormous impact on how you are perceived. So, let's start with introductions:

Everyone knows the importance of first impressions. Make a good first impression within the first few minutes of a social encounter and it sets the bar. Whether we like it or not the fact remains that your behaviour in those first few minutes, seconds even, is often viewed as predictive of your manner and behaviour as a whole. It may not be fair, it may not be reasonable, but that's often the way it is.

There are certain useful ground rules we can all follow. For instance, it's usually better to listen and learn during your first encounter with groups. This way you may initially be viewed as cautious but acceptable. It gives you an opportunity to assess the nature of the group; who the opinion leaders are, who shoots from the hip, who the thoughtful and measured types are, and so on. It doesn't mean you should be mute: you may be there precisely because your thoughts or input is

required, but the general idea is not to express your views too forcefully. If nothing else it reduces the risk of making errors based on lack of knowledge and it gives you time to harness the information you may need to make informed comments.

It may be that you've been appointed to a job in order to bring a fresh perspective to things. This is good in that new eyes can be really helpful, but it can be counter-productive to keep comparing your new working environment with your former. You may well perceive some of the working practices as inefficient or poorly managed but your role isn't to rub up your new colleagues by making them feel less worthy or capable. If you constantly refer to your former working practices as though they are the gold standard it will have the effect of alienating both you and your views. Put another way, you will be more easily accepted if you point out the things you have in common. Keep your mannerisms under control and adopt a neutral style over issues you disagree with.

Authority

If your role requires you to exercise authority it's useful to establish this from the outset. It's good to think over some of the questions, comments and statements you may use ahead of a new role with authority. Your first impressions will become the sustainable image that will follow you for some time so it's important you think this through. Your non-verbal behaviour is as important, perhaps more so than what you say, but by all means don't be shy about referring to your background knowledge and skills because these are the reasons you're in post.

This is one example where your assertiveness skills become useful. There is always more time than people think, so don't do the 'new broom' approach, especially if based on very little knowledge. The fact that you have been appointed is an indication that authority is vested with you, so there's no need to throw your weight around, as everyone will know. Measured assertion may be to

do with pointing out some of the reasons you were appointed, your background and your skills. It's often easier to smooth the edges of an over-firm first impression than it is to exert authority over an overly soft entry. Stick to facts. Ask questions but avoid becoming embroiled on long-standing and possibly complex debates that have a history. Assert yourself by saying it's too soon for you to get involved in all issues at this stage. Time is your friend.

Complaints and Complaining

So long as people feel they have a grievance there will always be plenty of scope for complaining. For our purposes we have to consider why some complaints are effective whilst others simply languish as moans and grumbles. Complaining effectively is a skill and one that requires assertiveness. In this section we'll be looking both at making and handling complaints, what works and what doesn't.

The simple purpose of a complaint is to have your rights accepted and a grievance resolved. For the most part this is a daily occurrence involving millions of people. In large part these complaints are dealt with amicably and certainly without the need for aggression. So, if you've been short changed, you point it out. If you've asked for fish and you're given meat, you say something. Complaints don't need to be hostile and because we've all been victims of errors a complaint is something we should all understand and sympathise with.

That's the principle. And in principle it's very straight forward. Your opening statement should be clear and should indicate that you expect the other person to resolve the issue. In practice complaints can be one of the hardest social barriers to overcome, even for something as simple as returning a damaged item:

'I purchased this shirt two days ago and there's a mark on the collar. I'd like an exchange or a refund please.'

Your tone is matter-of-fact, to the point and unambiguous. You aren't blaming anyone it's simply an effective use of assertion.

But let's say you've been on the telephone for 30 minutes trying to resolve a billing or some technical issue with your broadband or TV service. You've been clear about what you want, you understand your rights in the matter, there is no ambiguity but you simply aren't making headway. Keep in mind that your objective hasn't changed. If you start to become angry the person you are talking to becomes more stubborn or more flustered. The temptation to point out that they haven't a clue what they are doing may be strong but it will also be counterproductive. These are the times you request to speak to their supervisor. You ask their name and you speak to them as a person. You point out the difficulties you are encountering and you now look to them to resolve the problem. Your objective throughout all this isn't to get tied up in knots over detail, or blame, or side issues, it's simply to achieve your objective.

Complaining assertively is also about giving the other person a chance to speak and explain. You may disagree but you have afforded them a right to explain the situation from their perspective. Showing you have actually listened to what they say is helpful, but this is not the same as accepting what is said as gospel and finding yourself fobbed off with a promise they will phone you back.

Handling Complaints

Some of the most difficult situations are being on the receiving end of a complaint. They can come at people quickly, unexpectedly and sometimes with an unhealthy level of hostility. Now the golden rule for handling complaints can

be summarised in one word, containment.

Keep containment in mind but before we get to that let's reflect on the fact that complaints can and do escalate. This invariably occurs for one of two reasons. First, the complaint is felt to have been poorly dealt with and redress is then sought from a higher authority. Secondly, as a result of perceived hostility, and often the fear this produces, the whole thing gets out of control.

We all know aggressive behaviour for what it is. It ranges from silent intimidation, to verbal assaults, threats and even threats of violence. The body language of aggression is well known. Jabbing fingers, distorted facial expression, teeth, frowns, staring, and invasion of personal space. But why should it even occur in the first place?

The single most common cause of aggression is due to people feeling they are being treated unfairly or are themselves under attack. Then again some aggression is purely instrumental. That is, it occurs as a kind of short-cut to get what the person wants when they want it. Unfortunately there is a degree of accuracy in the old adage that says he who shouts loudest gets heard. Many people believe that cutthroat approaches are the most effective, because in some cases they are. Most people prefer to avoid conflict, to back off in the face of overt hostility or threat, and this leaves the field open to the person who is most pushy. Winning and success are strong motivators for some people and they are qualities we in the West tend to admire. The fact that people are hurt in the process is viewed as par for the course, survival of the fittest, or some other weak rationale.

There are two other principle causes of aggression. Frustration is something we can all associate with. If we are consistently thwarted it can lead to an energy build up and an explosion of anger. Some people have rather thin skins when it comes to frustration and are easily angered. Finally there's the process of

modelling. Modelling is essentially a form of imitation, a hand-down from the people we look up to, admire, or who simply have close contact with us. I've moved around quite a lot and wherever I've lived I eventually hear about the 'difficult family', the 'no-go estate', or the school no parent wants to send their children. Modelling works for us when the qualities we acquire are viewed as positive but it can also work in the opposite direction.

Handling Angry Complaints

Pent up frustration can come at you in such a way that it's very unsettling. The key to handling complaints that are overlaid by anger is to allow the complainant their space. Don't try to over-talk them or shut them down, although you may have to suggest moving to a place where you can give them all your attention without distraction. Listen to what is being said and don't contradict them as this can make matters worse. Usually, once a person has let off steam they calm down relatively quickly. You need to keep a check on your body language and don't give away any signs that their behaviour is angering you. Easier said than done perhaps, but if you can try to work out the cause of the anger. Are they angry because they feel they've been attacked in some fashion? Is their anger underpinned by some unresolved need? Are they tired? It can help to soothe tempers by understanding its root cause.

Silence is good but like all techniques you must take care how you apply it. Stay quiet for too long and it may be perceived as provocative. You may be challenged by '*Speak up then, or am I talking to myself?*' In which case it's easy to say you were listening and just didn't want to interrupt. Importantly you need to assess whether the anger is directed to you as an individual or simply because you are a representative of the organisation that is causing the problem. Too often people take the flak over issues they didn't instigate or have any control over.

Very angry people are likely to have a negative effect on you, as they would on anyone. You shouldn't put yourself in the position of being an emotional punch-bag yet you somehow need to assert your own rights in this regard. One way is to point out the effect their shouting, abuse, body-language is having on you. By saying that they are making you tense and their situation is far more likely to be resolved by talking can have the necessary effect. I have worked in organisations where signs regarding abusive behaviour are pinned to the walls. I've even seen these same signs pointed to by staff on the receiving end of abuse. Increasingly hospitals and other large organisations have their own policies regarding abuse. Here's an example taken from Aberdeen City Council's own website. Note the language of assertion being used and then the stated consequences:

We at Aberdeen City Council, believe that our customers and service users have a right to be heard, understood and respected.

Occasionally, certain actions by people using our services can make it very difficult for us to deal with their enquiry or concern.

In a small number of cases the actions of some individuals become unacceptable because they involve abuse of our staff or our processes. When this happens we have to take appropriate steps. We have to consider whether the action impacts on our ability to do our work and to provide a service to others.

People may act out of character in times of trouble or distress. We do not view an action as unacceptable, just because a person is forceful or determined. However, we do consider actions that result in unreasonable demands on our staff to be unacceptable. It is these actions that we aim to manage under this policy.

There is a range of actions we consider to be unacceptable. These are:

- Aggressive or abusive behaviour;
- Unreasonable demands;
- Unreasonable levels of contact.

In fact the policy goes on to include unreasonable demands, unreasonable levels of contact and the ways in which the council may respond in different circumstances which include terminating abusive telephone calls, reporting

incidents to the police, seeing people by appointment only, and so on. It's a good example of how an organisation can protect its employees from aggressive acts.

Containment

At the start of the previous section I wrote the golden rule for handling complaints can be summarised in one word, containment. Now I want to expand on this a little. A former boss of mine used to say '*we need to stop this creature from growing legs and starting to run*'. It was his way of saying measures had to be taken in order to prevent some situation from escalating.

In order to contain a complaint it's important that we try to see the situation from the complainant's perspective. They are frustrated and the more likely their situation isn't resolved the greater the likelihood that their level of frustration will increase. There is often a pattern to complaints that causes frustration. The knee-jerk reaction from many people is to avoid the complaint and the usual method is to deny knowledge or say that it isn't their responsibility. Denying responsibility is actually fine so long as you can point to whose responsibility it is and direct the person to them. It may increase the complainant's frustration for a moment but at least they have a focus and the potential to have their complaint resolved. If avoidance is used simply to push the person away or counter-persuasion in the form of your own logic is used the chances are the situation will escalate.

The hardest part of containment comes when it seems clear the complaint is unjustified. Sadly there are plenty of people prepared to complain about some service in the hope of a refund, for example. Assertion in these situations is about following a particular set of protocols. Pulling together some of the key issues previously outlined it goes like this:

(a) You listen carefully and sympathetically to the complaint ensuring your body language doesn't betray your suspicions or discomfort. (b) You need to ensure that the main points of the complaint are recorded and you check back that you have the details correct. (c) You take some level of responsibility, whether this is passing the issue up or accepting that you will look further into the situation. (d) Unless you are very certain of your facts you never suggest a solution or allude to a possible outcome. (e) Most angry people calm down after a while because they recognise something in what they are doing and the possible effects it may be having. When this happens you have some scope to ask further probing questions in order to get your facts straight.

Building Assertiveness

There are actually several kinds of behaviour involved in assertiveness. So far I've mentioned the importance of speaking up and how to express and receive complaints. But assertion extends beyond these parameters into areas such as receiving and giving complements. It's to do with self-control over minor annoyances before they build into resentments. It's exerting our rights to question authority and tradition. It's about assuming personal responsibility when it's ours to shoulder. It's about our daily interactions, how we initiate conversations and how we bring them to a close and how we share our feelings with others.

Acknowledging Our Weak Spots

One of the first steps in building assertiveness is honesty, that is, honesty about ourselves. We all have weak spots. Some people can't say no, others can't take a compliment, some won't speak up, or disagree, or express an opinion. People may be sick but can't bring themselves to phone in, some don't recognise their own low moods relate to the fact they are being taken advantage of, or ignored, or bullied. They may feel the victim of cruel humour, they allow others to control their lives. Only you can assess the extent to which you're prepared to put up

with being exploited. I say this because everyone, I mean everyone, has one or more weak spots. I've worked with a psychologist who used to teach assertiveness. This same person would stand up in a meeting and calmly take apart the logic of senior managers in a meeting, yet she would rather eat raw vegetables than complain to a waiter.

If you recognise yourself as a person who has too many weakness in this regard you might want to consider keeping a diary or written record of the times and situations you find yourself doing or saying something that runs counter to what you want. All those times you couldn't say no when your friend or neighbour asked you to collect shopping for her '*as you're at the shops anyway*', and perhaps forgot to pay you. Or the times that guy at work found it funny to play practical jokes on you, or the way your spouse assumes you'll be ironing their shirts and making all the meals. You may find a written record a way to stimulate your thought processes. Try answering these questions:

- What kind of situations do you want to become more assertive in?
- What beliefs do you have that hold you back from being assertive?
- What unassertive behaviours do I use the most?
- What assertive behaviours could I use more?

Employ Strategies

Positive assertion is partly about thinking on your feet. Put another way, it's about recognising there are many different ways of coping with situations that are effective, tactful and reasonable. Sometimes it's about observing the skills other people have acquired. Watch how they contain situations and the techniques they use. For young people it can feel quite deflating to realise that their youth is sometimes a barrier to progress. But this is often due to assumptions that come with youth. If you act in a mature, responsible and fair fashion people will come around. So, we can observe and learn, but we can also employ other strategies:

First, we can describe the situation in as objective a manner as possible. Don't focus on assumed motives and don't make it personal. Next, take responsibility for your own emotions. Say 'I' rather than 'we' or 'the company'. Show resolve by maintaining eye contact (don't forget to blink or it starts to look threatening) and focus on solving the issue or achieving your goal. Make it clear what needs to change/stop/start but say it in ways that are reasonable. Remember assertion isn't about winning at all costs it's about accounting for the other person's situation as well. For this reason don't make unreasonable demands in the form of ultimatums.

Simple Techniques

You're the best judge of your weak spots but there's no harm in honing your assertion skills in fairly simple ways. For example, ask a stranger if they can direct you to a particular place. See if someone can give you change for car parking. Say a few words to the person serving you in a shop or café. Use situations you are involved with to pass a compliment about an item of clothing, a car or cycle, it doesn't matter what. People like praise and it's something unlikely to go wrong. Practice makes perfect and the more you practice the easier it becomes to work with more challenging situations.

Planning Ahead

Keeping a diary or notes about the issues you find most challenging is a good way of breaking down a lot of issues into bite-sized chunks. Let's say there are six or seven issues that you know you consistently avoid because of the hassle or anxiety they cause. You could list these on your sheet and give each a hassle score (say 1-10 where 10 is the biggest hassle of the lot)

Ask my friend to return the book she borrowed from me ages ago.	4	2
Tell my partner I want a few days away with my friends	2	1
Ask the neighbour to stop allowing their dog in my garden	6	3

In this example you can see the least hassle is seen as ‘telling my partner I want a few days away with my friends’, (score 2/10) because of this it’s the first thing I’ll tackle (ranked number 1). The hardest issue is confronting the neighbour over their dog (score 6/10) so it has been ranked number 3. Of course your list can be as big as you wish but to make things manageable I’d stick to a dozen or fewer items.

Okay, that’s it for this eBook. We hope it has stimulated your interest sufficiently to try out some of the suggestions. There are lots of self-help books and online resources you could also consider but try not to fill your time with research as this itself may be regarded as a way of avoiding the positive changes you hope to make in your own life.

Good luck from us all at positivityguides.net