

Assertiveness

A MIND-SET THAT LEADS TO ACHIEVEMENT



by Leroy Hamm

The internal struggle of feeling powerless in some situations and of being tentative in circumstances that required honest, direct communication left me ultimately with a choice: Learn how to communicate more effectively regardless of the different communication styles of others, or stay locked in my ineffective, self-made prison. I had to learn to be more assertive.

Years of frustration from living in a “prison of passivity” led me to write this article. Saying “yes” to decisions and people when I should have said “no” left me living with some very negative consequences — in some cases for years afterward. The internal struggle of feeling powerless in some situations and of being tentative in circumstances that required honest, direct communication left me ultimately with a choice: Learn how to communicate more effectively, regardless of the different communication styles of others, or stay locked in my ineffective, self-made prison. I had to learn to be more assertive.

Assertiveness is not just a skill, it is a mind-set. And it can be difficult to learn because living it is more of an emotional issue than a rational one — both for the aggressive and for the passive person. It is a matter of unlearning certain misconceptions and learning another way of looking at oneself and others. In a word, it is confidence. In their book, *Execution*, Larry Bossidy, Ram Charan and Charles Burck call it emotional fortitude. “Emotional fortitude,” says Bossidy, “gives you the courage to accept points of view that are opposite of yours and deal with conflict and the confidence to encourage and accept challenges in group settings. It enables you to deal with your own weaknesses, be firm with people who aren’t performing, and to handle the ambiguity inherent in fast-moving, complex organizations.” He goes on to say, “How can your organization face reality if people don’t speak honestly and if its leaders don’t have the confidence to surface and resolve conflicts or give and take honest criticism?”

The internal characteristic necessary to do these things is assertiveness, and managers have to have it. In the book, *First Break All the Rules*, by Buckingham & Coffman of the Gallup organization, according to their feedback from surveying over 85,000 managers in 400 companies over a 25-year period of time, it is the mid-level manager who makes or breaks an organization. They report, “We discovered that the manager — not pay, benefits, perks or a charismatic corporate leader — was the critical player in building a strong workplace. The manager was the key.” They go on to say, “People leave managers, not companies. If you have a

turnover problem, look first to your managers.” In the book, *Intellectual Capitol*, Thomas Stewart says that companies have started to realize that whether the task is that of an accountant or housekeeper, a great deal of a company’s value now lies “between the ears of its employees.” According to Baruch Leo, professor of finance and accounting at New York University’s Stern School of Business, the assets and liabilities listed on a company’s balance sheet now account for only 60 percent of its real market value. What is truly valuable in a company, then, is its people who produce those balance sheets.

Aggressiveness

If this is true, then what is it that causes managers to lose people? Why do people leave their managers? In a study by Morgan McCall & Michael Lombardo titled *Derailed Executives*, six out of 10 reasons that managers derail on their way to the top had to do with relationships. They are as follows:

1. An insensitivity to others, an abrasive, intimidating bullying style.
2. Coldness, aloofness or arrogance.
3. Over-managing, failing to delegate or to build a team.
4. Failure to staff effectively.
5. Inability to adapt to a boss with a different style.
6. Over-dependence on a single mentor.

All of the six causes of derailment listed above can be related back to assertiveness issues. For example, one assertiveness issue, aggressiveness, is a behavioral style that cares little about the needs, opinions or feelings of others, and gets what he or she wants in a domineering, obtuse and often impatient way. The language of an aggressive person is demeaning, “You can’t do anything right. You’ll never make it.” Or, “You shouldn’t be in this business.” Aggressiveness inherently has character flaws. It is selfish, insensitive and unfair. In the list above, it could be the cause of all six of the characteristics of a derailed executive. Typically, control is a big issue for aggressive people. They demand control because they fear the loss of it. What we fear tends to make us angry. So, the aggressive person handles his anger in an unhealthy way and scatters bodies on his way to the top.

Passivity

On the other end of the spectrum is passivity. It is a behavioral style that places the needs, opinions and feelings of others above one’s own. The passive person may hide his disagreements under the cloak of being nice and agreeable, and may sacrifice an honest attempt to expose the heart of an issue or hide what he really thinks in order to maintain harmony. In fairness to the passive person, the driving force behind his peace-keeping tendencies is a fear of rejection. His thinking might go like this: “I don’t want to tell you the truth or what I really think because you might get upset.” This rationale is based on a fear of disapproval or rejection. The self-talk may continue with, “If I say something that offends you, you may not like me.”

This is an issue of self-confidence. If someone says something “bad” about the passive person, he may assume he has done something to deserve it and that he doesn’t have the right to be assertive. After all, assertion may bring on conflict, and conflict is bad and something to be feared. Again, this misconception is an emotional issue, not a rational one. Emotions are determined by our thoughts, and the rationale for this misconception must be challenged and disputed if the non-assertive person will ever unlock his prison of passivity. For example, an effective internal argument would be: “It doesn’t make sense for me to be intimidated by him in our meetings. I will never tell the group what I really think if I continue letting my fears control me. Also, it is not fair to others or to myself to not tell them what I think. I must become more assertive in my interactions with others if I am to be true to myself.”

The language of the passive person is tentative and often deflecting. For example, “Okay. I’ll go along, but it’s your fault if this proposal of yours doesn’t work.” The passive person in this scenario doesn’t have to be responsible for the consequences. Another attempt at deflection might play out as follows:

Question: Are you mad? Is anything wrong?

Answer: No, I’m just tired.

The character flaws of the passive person are dishonest, irresponsible and manipulative. These words may sound harsh for the peace-loving, passive individual,

but they describe an often-unseen weakness on the part of managers who do not have the “emotional fortitude” or “confidence” to deal with difficult situations in an assertive way. The result is often, at best, an organization not living up to its potential, and at worst, bleeding the life out of it as a result of failing to execute.

The Assertive Person

The definition of assertion is getting or asking for what you want while showing respect for the other person. You can do this through your own personality. Sometimes introverts shy away from the idea because they assume that to be assertive they must assume an “assertive” image. There is no assertive image. Assertiveness is a choice. But often the passive person has to break through certain misconceptions and give himself permission to do what needs to be done or said, even if it is initially difficult. The aggressive person will see assertion as soft peddling or sugar coating the real issue. In the short term, the aggressive person may get what he wants, but relationships are damaged in the long run with this behavioral style.

The assertive person gets to the “real issue,” as well, but places the rights, feelings and opinions of others equal to his own. His language is direct but respectful. To an aggressive person, he might say, “I want to hear what you have to say, but I’m not willing to be called names.” Or, “when did you begin feeling that I don’t care about the company?” Or, “Joe, that’s an aggressive statement.” The assertive person draws lines and establishes boundaries when necessary to insure his rights, feelings and opinions are respected. For example, the executive assistant may say, “It would help me if you would give me a list of priorities of the items you have given me.” Often an employee must also learn to manage his manager.

The character traits of the assertive person are respectful, fair and honest. He is never demeaning. Conversation is professional, not personal. He attacks the problem instead of the person. (i.e., “We have a problem” versus “you have a problem.”) He uses “I” language versus “you” language. (“I get frustrated because I can’t do my job when you get these weekly reports in to me late.”) He is honest and states what he wants to see happen as opposed to wasting time blaming

and fault finding. He is sensitive to others while tough on decisions.

In 1988, I was in the start-up mode of a new division of our company, and my pay was tied to performance. When I asked for a raise, since things weren't moving as fast as expected, my boss said, "I'm sorry you're having financial problems, but I'm not able to do that and be fair to everyone else in the company." I learned a great deal that day about emotional fortitude and assertiveness. He expressed sensitivity toward me, while making a tough but fair decision.

Assertiveness is responsible. Rather than skirting or shirking the blame, the assertive person assumes and/or shares in making decisions and is there to take the consequences.

Passive Aggressiveness

Finally, a behavioral style that warrants addressing is actually a blend of two that have been discussed: passive and aggressive. Passive aggressive behavior can best be described as a cloud and/or a sniper. A "cloud" is one who resists change, slows workflow or damages the efforts of others or an organization without making others aware of his motive(s). He is like a cloud because he is hard to touch. A sniper is someone who "takes shots" at a person in a forum where the other person is not present to defend himself. This is gossip.

Gossip is passive aggressive behavior. The aggressive aspect of it is an attempt to hurt someone's reputation or damage the department or organization, and the passive side is doing it in a subtle, unnoticeable and/or indirect way.

The definition of gossip is sharing detrimental information with someone who is neither part of the problem nor part of the solution. There are two kinds of gossip: innocent and malicious. One can be just as destructive as the other. The following are five possible reasons people gossip:

1. An individual has been hurt and retaliates in anger.
2. An individual is afraid to confront directly.
3. He has a need for attention and approval from certain others to feel accepted.
4. An individual has the desire to build his or her own position artificially by tearing down others.
5. Habit. We get used to relating through gossip.

The only conditions under which we should talk about someone are:

1. It must be the truth.
2. Comments could be made with that person present.
3. If for whatever reason it would not be appropriate to have that person present, then the person you're sharing your comments or concerns with must be part of the solution.

If you have gossiped about a person, take a fearless moral inventory of your motives for doing so. Ask yourself, "Have I been hurt and feel the need to retaliate in an indirect way? Am I afraid to confront directly? Do I need approval and am I attempting to get acceptance from the individuals to whom I am gossiping? Am I attempting to elevate my own position formally or informally by tearing the other person down with gossip? Have I gotten used to a damaging habit?"

Someone asked me once, "What if I am just sharing my opinion?" If the motive is to discredit someone else or build yourself or your position up, then you need to keep that opinion to yourself and assess your motive, because your opinion has become gossip.

If someone begins gossiping to you, ask them, "Have you talked to (the person) about this?" or "I don't see that person that way at all," or "What does that have to do with what we're talking about?" Remember, gossip is an unhealthy foundation for a relationship. Your *real* influence on those around you diminishes the more you gossip.

The practice of gossip in many organizations goes unchecked and unchallenged, but its damage is far reaching. I recently heard an organization's ousted leader return to reconcile himself to the group that had ostracized him eight years earlier. He said, "If I had done half of the things I later heard I had supposedly done, I would not be worthy of standing before you."

Another form of passive aggressive behavior is sarcasm. Sarcasm can be and is often intended to be cutting. Often the person using sarcasm says the opposite of what is meant. For example, the comment "Nice suit, Joe!" may mean, "Joe, I can't believe you're wearing something like that to work!" Sarcasm is negative humor. I once asked the owner of a medical

clinic why his computer was not working, and he said, "Oh, that's Sally's (office manager) personality messing it up." Depending upon the mutually accepted boundaries in the relationship, that could have been humorous at best and derogatory at worst. The truth of the matter is that she was offended and chose to keep quiet instead of responding in a healthy, assertive way like, "Tom, I'm sure you didn't mean that as a cut, but that is not necessary." With that comment, she would have assumed a positive motive and at the same time would have drawn one of many lines she would most likely have to draw to teach him how it is she wants to be treated.

Assertiveness Leads to Freedom

Whether you have an aggressive, passive or passive-aggressive behavioral style, you can ask for what you want, say what you feel, be true to yourself and have healthier relationships if you learn to relate to others in an assertive way. From the age of five, I learned how to deal with life and others in a passive way. My mother's advice, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all," was most likely born from a desire to teach her kids to treat each other with respect. But she didn't give us an assertive option, which could have given us a healthy alternative to throwing "names" at each other. It is not easy to move into a more effective way of relating, because old habits are hard to break and the issue of confidence runs so deep. But the benefits are worth it. The reward of becoming assertive can be summed up in one word: Freedom. ■