

A FRIENDLY, MULTICULTURAL WORKPLACE

A TOOLKIT FOR TRAINERS, MANAGERS, HR PROFESSIONALS AND
TRADE UNION LEADERS



Module IV

ASSERTIVENESS

Constructive protection of one's own rights

WHAT IS ASSERTIVENESS?



Assertiveness and the protection of workers' rights

Assertiveness is the skill necessary to consciously protect one's rights. This process starts with a psychological procedure of **acknowledging one's own right to respect, actively defending one's own dignity and asserting one's own rights in relations with the environment**. We call this adopting an assertive attitude, and the actions flowing from this attitude - assertive behaviour.

Assertiveness is essential for establishing partnerships with those around us, including our employer or the person acting on their behalf, i.e. our immediate supervisor. Assertiveness also gives us the power to react when something is wrong, to ask when we don't understand something or to ask for help when we can't do it ourselves.

I am OK, you are OK

Assertiveness, in the simplest terms, is a **positive attitude towards oneself**, giving oneself the right to satisfy one's needs and being ready to defend one's own rights while having a **positive attitude towards the other party in the interaction** and respecting their boundaries.

In common terms, assertiveness is most often understood as the ability to say no and the opposite of submissiveness. In fact, **an assertive attitude is the opposite of submissiveness, aggression and manipulation** and among assertive behaviours, apart from refusing, there is a whole catalogue of behaviours that can help us to fulfil our own needs and build constructive relationships with those around us.

I am OK, you are OK

Eric Berne described the assertive attitude as a position of 'I am OK, you are OK'. This means that we are equal to each other and, as such, we can get along and cooperate with each other on an equal footing. In opposition to the assertive attitude stand:

- **AGGRESSION** (I am OK, you are not OK);
- **SUBMISSIVENESS** (I am not OK, you are OK);
- **MANIPULATIVE ATTITUDE** (I am not OK., you are not OK).

We tend to be assertive occasionally not constantly

If at this point it seems to you that you are not very assertive, don't worry. We all seem to be, and we all find it difficult to behave assertively. This is largely due to the culture we have been brought up in.

As children, most of us were encouraged to be submissive ('don't complain', 'don't be rude', 'don't talk to your elders like that') or aggressive ('you have to fight for your own', 'did you give it back?'). It is worth noting that submissive behaviour is usually attributed to girls while boys are more often brought up to be aggressive. This does not go unnoticed in our behaviour in adulthood.

It is also important to remember that we tend to **be assertive occasionally not constantly**. There is no person in the world who is always and fully assertive every minute of their life, in every relationship and in every situation.

We can learn being assertive

The good news is that assertiveness can simply be learned. What's more, **practising and implementing assertive behaviour strengthens the assertive attitude in us. A strong assertive attitude, in turn, makes it much easier for us to respond assertively to the world.**

How do you develop your assertiveness? There are many books and self-help guides available for learning assertive behaviour and strengthening an assertive attitude. We also recommend attending assertiveness workshops offered by most training companies. Practising assertive behaviours daily and not becoming discouraged when setbacks occur will also be an important part of personal training. They are a completely natural part of the learning process!

We can learn being assertive

But how do you start learning assertiveness now without additional reading or training? We suggest starting by repeating the following text to yourself: **‘I have the right to respect. I have the right to feel safe at work. I have the right to be paid a decent and timely wage. I have the right to defend my interests. I have the right not to agree to everything that others want from me. I have the right to ask questions, ask for help and make mistakes. I have the right to develop my skills and fulfil my dreams.’**

This text can of course be modified to suit your individual needs. But it is worth repeating it as often and as long as you believe in its contents! It will help us to have a positive attitude towards our employer and colleagues and to remember our rights and our contribution to the team and the company. And let's remember, assertiveness is not aggression. Assertiveness means ‘I am OK! You are OK!’

ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOUR



Assertive behaviour

As mentioned above, assertiveness is much more than the ability to say no. Adopting an assertive attitude allows us to build valuable relationships with those around us and to respond constructively, in all those situations where our boundaries intersect with those of others. Assertive behaviours include:

- ✓ ability to **express one's opinion** in a constructive and non-harmful way;
- ✓ ability to express **one's emotions** constructively;
- ✓ ability to **say no** when someone's request seems unreasonable or when we are not able to comply with it;

Assertive behaviour

- ✓ ability to **accept requests and offer help** in a partner manner (i.e. saying 'yes');
- ✓ ability to **accept and deal with criticism**;
- ✓ ability to **give feedback**, i.e. colloquial criticism, in a constructive and non-hurtful way;
- ✓ ability to **ask for help** when we need it;
- ✓ ability to **admit mistakes and errors**;
- ✓ ability to **accept praise and compliments**, and ability to appreciate oneself.

Assertive behaviour

Assertiveness is also the **ability to build closeness and to appreciate and support others**. It is through an assertive attitude that we can build positive, partnering and empowering relationships with superiors and colleagues. In turn, experience shows that **positive team relations are the best protective factor** against labour law violations and, at the same time, the strongest weapon should such irregularities occur.

In a crisis, it is your closest colleagues who can prove to be your biggest and most important support. On the other hand - if one of your closest colleagues gets hurt - it is you who can become his/her greatest ally.

ASSERTIVENESS IN PRACTICE



Basics of assertive communication

An assertive attitude is mainly expressed in the messages we create to the world. The following slides present simple 'recipes' for assertive messages useful in situations of refusal, dealing with criticism or formulating feedback. They are all based on the basic principles of assertive communication:

- ✓ **speak up for yourself!** Describe your point of view, your needs and your emotions. Don't guess what the other party is thinking or what his or her intentions are;
- ✓ **separate FACTS, OPINIONS and EMOTIONS.** Don't confuse facts with your own opinions, and avoid hiding your emotions and needs behind beliefs;
- ✓ **as little generalisation as possible, as much as possible of YOUR OWN POINT OF VIEW.** Generalisations are almost always untrue and as such lead to increased tension and the development of conflict. Instead of using generalisations, focus on sharing your point of view.

Basics of assertive communication

- ✓ **As few opinions as possible, as many FACTS, EMOTIONS, NEEDS.** Focusing on opinions and beliefs gets us stuck in a conflict 'about being right'. Instead, put facts and precise expression of your own needs and emotions.
- ✓ **As little negation as possible, as much AGAINST and OFFERING.** Assertive communication is served by appreciating each other, making constructive suggestions for solutions, listening to each other and seeking mutual understanding.
- ✓ **I am ok! You are ok!** Regardless of who and what we are talking to, an assertive attitude invites us to adopt an I OK! You OK! This means that I have the right to ask you for something, you have the right to say no. I have the right to be proud of my presentation, you have the right to feel unsatisfied. I have the right to share my opinion on a subject, you have the right to have a different opinion!

Assertive rejection

- 1. A CLEAR AND UNEQUIVOCAL NO!**
I will not be able to substitute you.
- 2. DETAILED AND CLARICAL REASONING** (if necessary)
I already have an appointment for tomorrow afternoon.
- 3. DENIAL** (for the sake of the relationship)
I regret that I cannot help you.
- 4. ALTERNATIVE** (if needed and sensible)
If it helps anything I can substitute you until noon. Maybe you can get your business done then.
- 5. DOUBLE PLATE**
As I said, I can't manage to replace you at this meeting.
- 6. CONSTRUCTIVE COMMUNICATION** (no attacks, blaming, etc.)

Assertive handling of criticism

- 1. QUESTION**
(What exactly do you mean?)
- 2. ACCEPTANCE**
(Actually...)
- 3. PARTIAL ACCEPTANCE**
(Sometimes..., Perhaps...)
- 4. EXPRESSING YOUR OWN OPINION**
(I see it differently... I liked it ...)
- 5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**
(Thank you, a contributing comment!)

Assertive feedback

1. **FACTS**

(What has happened?)

2. **POSITION**

(What does it do to me?)

3. **CONSEQUENCES**

(What does it do to me?)

4. **EXPECTATIONS**

(What do I need for the future? What can we do to make sure it doesn't happen again?)

SUMMARY



Worth remembering!

- ✓ **Assertiveness is the attitude and flowing behaviour** that underpins building partnerships with all those around us.
- ✓ Assertiveness is also **the way we treat ourselves.**
- ✓ Assertiveness is an attitude **I am ok! You are ok!** i.e. respecting one's own emotions, needs, dreams and opinions, while at the same time fully respecting someone else's emotions, needs, dreams or opinions.
- ✓ The opposite of assertiveness is both **submissiveness and aggression or manipulation.**
- ✓ Assertiveness is a **learned attitude**, which means that we can and even should work on it throughout our lives.

Material developed as part of the project *Enhancing the potentials for decent work actions in social dialogue: 2023-2024* implemented by Międzyzakładowy Samorządny Niezależny Związek Zawodowy Pracowników CMC Poland Sp. z o. o. i Spółek and Ogólnopolski Konwent Agencji Pracy. Supported by Norway through the Norway Grants 2014-2021, under the programme “Social Dialogue – Decent Work”.

