

Fact Sheet – Assertiveness

Assertiveness is the appropriate application of personal boundaries through action and communication. An assertive person expresses their honest feelings and preferences in a manner which is respectful to others. Assertive behaviour may be distinguished from *submissive* behaviour, where a person fails to communicate their feelings and preferences but instead defers to others, and from *aggressive* behaviour, where a person communicates in an angry and insulting manner.

Being assertive is a key part of being an effective lawyer, and an effective professional. It involves:

- Knowing your rights
- Feeling free to express your thoughts, feelings and preferences
- Having control over your anger, so that you can respond rather than react
- Reading the feelings of the person you are communicating with
- Making strategic decisions about what you say and do next
- Keeping clear at all times on what is right for you, and what you want to achieve

A common observation about assertive people is that they 'separate the person from the problem'. This means focusing on the other person's words and actions (temporary, changeable), rather than attributing them to the characteristics of the person (permanent, unchangeable). A basic example of this would be to say "I understand what you were trying to say in class today, but from the way you expressed it I can also see how some of the other students would have thought it was rude" rather than "You are such a rude person".

Another common expression is 'agreeing to disagree'. This involves recognising the other person's feelings, opinions and preferences, and acknowledging their right to them.

Assertive people are not always assertive on every occasion. We are all human, and we sometimes don't behave how we would ideally wish to. It is an emotional intelligence skill to be able to apologise where we feel our behaviour was more or less than assertive (maintaining our views, just apologising for the way we expressed them), and to forgive ourselves and focus on learning from what triggered our less effective behaviour.

Further Information

Bower, S. A. and Bower, G.H. *Asserting Yourself: A Practical Guide for Positive Change*, Addison Wesley, Reading, MA (1991).

Assertiveness training:

http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=9778&cn=353