

Ten important points for consideration

I What results are you looking for?

In the first chapter we talk about our definition of assertive behaviour: standing up for yourself and expressing your feelings and opinions without offending the other person.

In the following chapter we go into more detail about this definition and we encourage you to look at your own behaviour, to modify it and move on – one step at a time. We assume that this is what you want to do. Perhaps you are thinking: ‘I want to be more assertive’. Or ‘I want to be able to show people more often what I am capable of’. Or ‘I want to be more effective and live up to the image that I project’. We all (and that includes you) have our own feelings about the results we want to achieve and we all express these feelings in our own personal way.

You need to have strong willpower to embark on this undertaking. Being subassertive is a tough habit to kick and modifying and replacing it is a long-term challenge. It is not as easy as it looks, otherwise you would have done it already, or at least done *something* about it.

Why are you intent on spending so much time and energy on it? What’s in it for you? You want to be more effective of course. Or is it also because you hope it will make you feel generally more satisfied, more at peace – or could we go as far as saying happier? Happiness: it’s a simple enough word, but without getting too theoretical about it, we’d like to quote a few commonly cited qualifications.

- A feeling of self-confidence – that you can succeed at anything if you really want to.
- A feeling of imperturbable calm, even if you’re not successful.
- A feeling of self-control, a feeling of vitality.
- Limiting to a minimum the amount of energy wasted on unnecessary tasks.
- Being able to get on in your work, love and play without interference.
- Enjoying relationships with other people where there is no alienation caused by pointless energy-draining resentment and animosity.

- Caring for others as much as you care for yourself.
- A feeling of unconditional self-worth.

If you take time and look patiently at your own subassertive patterns and improve them, you will find that it is possible to achieve all of the above. But please bear with us if you find that we are treating you over-protectively at this early stage in the procedures. Being assertive is not a cure-all, or a patented medicine that will solve any deeply ingrained problems that you may have.

And it certainly does not provide the answer to the one thing that we all share in common: the sense of sadness that is inherent in all our lives.

2 Getting the balance right

We human beings seem to be born with two sides to our character and we often end up looking for solutions to two problems at the same time: looking after ourselves and looking after others. It's a self-appointed role that we take upon ourselves.

This approach to certain issues can be problematic. All too often assertiveness is summarised simplistically as 'How can I stand up for myself?' You see books being published with a big 'Say No' on the cover as though the word 'Yes' were completely taboo.

The traditional definition of assertiveness that we all, including many of our colleagues, have adopted over the decades is: standing up for yourself without needlessly offending other people.

Needlessly? Why the word needlessly? Because it's not always possible unfortunately, to avoid offending people. You can avoid hurting others of course if you are restrained and hold back. And most of the time you would be right to favour this option. But there are certain situations where you can also opt for a more balanced approach. You can do this by expressing your wishes, your opinions and feelings when necessary. However, no matter how friendly you are, you may still upset the other person. Sorry. But there's no way around that one.

3 Warn your entourage

If you decide to take a better, more balanced approach and you are going to reveal more of the real you to people, you have to be prepared for the fact that not everyone will be thrilled about this. At the end of the day, you have indulged your entourage for a long time with your subassertive behaviour. Some people will be happy that you have crept

out of your shell, but others will be less so and will be suspicious about what you are up to!

Your entourage deserve to know what you are doing. Telling them will give them a better understanding of your new attitude.

4 Aggressive behaviour does not equal assertive behaviour

Aggressive behaviour implies standing up for yourself and needlessly offending the other person in the process. This is hostile and alienates people. Aggressive behaviour can also take the form of gentle pressure where a camouflage is created by using sweet smiles, a soft tone of voice, taking advantage of a person's kindness, et cetera.

This type of aggressive behaviour is often more difficult to ignore than outbursts from people with short fuses or loutish behaviour that a lot of people increasingly find themselves confronted with. This type of behaviour is not only hostile, alienating people, but it is also often blatantly threatening. In no way does this resemble assertiveness.

How can one put an end to this type of psychological harassment effectively and with dignity? By creating boundaries and behaving assertively.

5 Subassertive behaviour encourages aggressive behaviour

Subassertive behaviour actually encourages the insidious spread of aggression. It is interesting that parents who behave subassertively end up with aggressive children. The children of these kinds of parents do not learn that other people also have a right to their feelings and boundaries. The children do not learn to put minor frustrations in their proper place. They are only interested in their own thoughts and feelings and ignore those of others.

This type of educational failing that is a consequence of subassertive behaviour on the part of parents often leads to the kind of aggressive behaviour that we criticise so fiercely.

6 The advantages of giving up subassertive behaviour

If, however, you are used to behaving subassertively in certain situations, beware; you are not just indulging others you are also indulging yourself. By this we mean that subassertive behaviour has certain advantages that make life easier for us.

7 The price of assertive behaviour

In all things there are fruits to be picked and a price to pay. The same applies to assertive behaviour. We know from experience that in a great many situations it is the fruits that far outweigh the price. Other people benefit from the efforts you have made, they think this is the normal way to behave and may actually applaud it. But there are some situations where it is important to use plain common sense, and even people who are accustomed to behaving assertively need to do this.

You can choose of course to put off your assertive behaviour until a later date. You can also put your point across indirectly. One way of doing this is by socialising and gaining the confidence of others.

The following is an example of a really indirect approach. It involves whistleblowers. These are people who tell the outside world about instances of fraud or other abuses after they have tried and failed to draw the attention of people internally. You need to remember that if you get this kind of thing wrong, you will find yourself in serious trouble. Try to find an indirect way first, seek assistance. Don't isolate yourself; be open and involve others. Stick to the correct procedures.

This is also important in instances of harassment at work. Are you a victim of long-standing harassment? In companies, institutions and schools you need to be able to rely on support from higher up in the organisation. If it is not available, seek it elsewhere from a trade union, a lawyer or from people with strong characters in your entourage.

Do you have a choice? You always have a choice. If you think about it, it's not just about 'How many knocks can I expect to get? And do I want that? Is it worth it?' It's also about 'If I don't say anything about this, will I be able to live with it?' Your sense of self-worth is threatened.

Should I say nothing when I see that one particular boy is always being harassed by the rest of the group? When it is plain that almost all of my colleagues are stealing things from work? When I have to listen to jokes in poor taste – together with roars of laughter – about people with different sexual inclinations? Am I supposed to stay silent? Should I

have to conceal the fact that I am dyslexic? Do I have to put up with the pawing and the dirty jokes, even though my colleagues don't think it's childish and even find it rather amusing?

8 Some keys to solutions

Think of a situation where you have a tendency to behave subassertively: you don't stand up for your opinions, you don't express your feelings and you don't respect your own boundaries. Anything to avoid needlessly damaging the relationship you have with the other person. Is this really what you want? Or would you actually rather behave more assertively, but find that difficult to achieve. Does this sound like you? Good, then let's continue.

Which of the following questions is the most useful in this situation?

- *Why am I doing this?*
- *What should I do?*

Neither of them in fact. The most useful question is:

- *If I don't do something about this now, will I continue making the same mistakes for ever?*

This question will help you with the next question. What obstacles are holding you back? Why do you stay stuck in a pattern that you yourself don't like? If you are familiar with certain keys you will be able to remove these obstacles that hold so much sway over you.

Here are a few obstacles that may be keeping you stuck in your subassertive behaviour patterns. If you want to change the way you behave, use the keys that we have presented to respond to each obstacle.

1 You imagine that the other person will become offended and angry. You are imagining and you actually believe that this is what is going to happen before the situation occurs.

Key: Stop imagining. Check with other people if your assumptions are correct.

2 You assume that a certain person needs you in order to meet his or her own needs and you retain your hurt and anger to excess, even in situations where it would be perfectly acceptable for you to express them appropriately.

Key: Look at what you are imagining and correct it.

3 In such situations you become tense and without thinking, you slip into subassertive behaviour. You imagine that you are unable to deal with the stress. So, you just carry on in your old patterns and take the easy option – the wrong option in fact.

Key: Do a few relaxation exercises so that you can ascertain how stress manifests itself in you. If you become tense again you'll know what to do.

4 Avoiding issues only creates problems. If you succeed in avoiding a problematic situation you might feel relieved at first. However you are only making it even more difficult for yourself to adopt a different style of behaviour in a similar situation later on.

The relief you feel is short-lived and in fact simply spurs you on to continue with your pattern of avoiding uncomfortable situations.

Key: Break this habit step by step: easy to difficult. Observe how others solve their problems. Read this book thoroughly. Follow a training course.

5 There are people in your entourage who will be only too happy if you continue your subassertive behaviour. The pat on the back, the hugs and compliments all serve to keep you in your old familiar behaviour pattern.

Key: Reflect on the fact that you are actually indulging them. Don't be peevish, realise that it's your own fault and that you are clearly getting something out of it too. Decide what standpoint you want to take and stick to in the future.

6 You find it difficult to find the right words and have difficulty expressing yourself.

Key: Listen to other people. How do they express themselves, what words do they use? Use these words and expressions yourself and see if they produce the desired results.

7 You think: 'I'm no good at it and I won't succeed anyway.'

Key: Concentrate on the times when you do succeed. Changing one's behaviour does not happen overnight. This book will help you practice one step at a time. Start with the easy things and then move on to more difficult things and if at first you don't succeed, try again or go back a step.

8 I seem to do nothing but analyse things all the time, but nothing changes.

Key: Do something and take action. You can't change a habit of a lifetime overnight. You need time, start by taking a different approach to small things.

9 Give someone a helping hand

The keys we have presented here will also help you to help someone else whose care you have been entrusted with.

You need to realise beforehand that it doesn't help to mock someone with subassertive behaviour or to speak to them in a patronising tone. That is a kind of punishment and only increases the fear and consequently, the problem. Aggressively punishing behaviour is never appropriate.

The most important things in our opinion are:

- praise people (never in a group situation and always with sincerity) when they do succeed
- give people hope in a practical way.

It is important that you take a good critical look at your own kindness. Ask yourself the following questions: 'Why does a certain person let others walk all over them?' Has he or she got problems that you don't yet know about? Or is this simply a quiet person? Does the person in question have a problem with it or are you just imagining things?

Unfortunately there's not enough room in this book to go into further detail, but perhaps it will prompt some ideas, if so you can always contact us with your questions at: assertiviteit@thema.nl.

10 Conclusion

In this chapter we started with ten points to consider. In the second part we will start with 'the real work'. Take careful note of our comments and recommendations. We have chosen a step-by-step approach: from easy to difficult (successive approximation). The first steps may seem to be irritatingly simple, but we advise you to give them your full attention nevertheless; the things that you already have under control will benefit from being reinforced. These are the foundations for all the later steps.

In this book you will come across a great number of examples. They are there to stimulate your imagination. That is the only reason they are there. Any examples used are taken from work and home situations, but even when all added together, they will never match the wealth of your own personal experience.

Part 2

Now let's get down to it

