

THE SECRET OF EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

How to use assertive communication skills to increase your personal effectiveness in business meetings

Have you ever left a meeting wondering why you were asked to attend and thought what an inconclusive shambles it was? Many people dread meetings, even though they are a necessary part of everyday business. Meetings lose their effectiveness through misuse and lack of assertive communication between the participants.

To ensure the effective use of meetings, the following points needed to be considered. 1) What makes a successful meeting, 2) What is assertive communication, and, 3) How to guarantee successful, effective meetings by using assertive skills.

1) The key to ensuring effective meetings is that there is a significant reason for having one, and everyone attending is prepared to fully participate. The meeting will give the participants a forum to express their views; the team as a whole can explore and assess ideas where decisions are reached. Everyone leaves the meeting better informed. They have been a part of the decision making process and, as a result, are willing to take the necessary actions agreed.

There is no doubt that we all know instinctively when a meeting has been well run, even if we do not know quite how it happened. Likewise, we have all come across people who manage to be honest, calm, and forthright in the most difficult situations and still have respect for others feelings. How do they do it? They have learnt to be assertive.

2) Being assertive is not to be confused with aggressive behaviour. Assertive communication means saying what you need to say, calmly, in a way that is noted by others, while listening to and respecting others opinions.

passive<.....>Assertive<.....>AGGRESSIVE

To illustrate the different dynamics, look at the continuum above. If you rarely speak in a meeting you are taking a passive part. Maybe you were invited to sit in and listen. That justifies your role as a passive one. If not, then you are not taking full part in the proceedings and are of little value.

The opposite end of the continuum is AGGRESSIVE, which can present itself in meetings by members, trying to dominate the proceedings with their views. They constantly raise questions and have bee in their bonnets. This will often force the group into being apart of an unquestioned decision making process that will have no true validity. To find the middle ground, being Assertive, takes self-assurance and maturity regardless of your age or position in the company.

3) The most effective way to use assertive behaviour in a meeting is to know what your role is and to be prepared for it. For example, are you there to observe, will you need to give a progress report or is this a meeting you are chairing? This might seem very obvious, but often with the fast pace of business today the most basic information gets forgotten, making meetings incomplete.

Having good assertive communication skills means that you work well with the expected and the unexpected – For example, if your boss is stuck in another meeting and you have been asked to represent for him in the monthly meeting that morning. Being assertive is to be professional. In this case, to garner all relevant information efficiently and act accordingly. Do not be passive in the meeting, sliding down the seat of your chair hoping no one will notice you. Neither should you be aggressive, blaming others for putting you in a difficult situation.

To be assertive you must have the confidence to speak up. The most effective assertive behaviour, on this occasion, is to confirm your position as last minute stand-in for your boss. You can tell the other members what you know and what you do not. Take personal notes to keep your boss informed and invite any special comments the meeting may want you to pass on. Remember, at this stage, using assertive behaviour also includes not being personally upset if you find yourself the target of the meeting's backlash because of your boss's absence!

Imagine another scenario. You are in a new job and the youngest person around the table. You have to chair the meeting to discuss difficult issues. If there is a negative mood in the meeting, expressed either aggressively or with passive non co-operation, state that their manner is not helpful. Be calm, but firm. Assure them their constructive views are welcome. Counteract unproductive disagreements by asking individuals directly, "How do you think this problem can be solved?" The strength of assertive behaviour is the willingness to be personally accountable for what you do and to elicit that

accountability in others. When the meeting needs to move forward, acknowledge the concerns and strong opinions of members. “ I hear that you feel very strongly about this.... but to resolve is issue at this stage, can we please have a show of hands around the table”. Everyone will feel included and accountable.

The benefit of assertive communication is that it allows for compromise when needs and rights conflict. When emotions run high it is more tempting to shout across the table or daydream. Don't – it will not achieve what you need. As a quick reference to assertive communication, think of how you would like to be treated. To say what you need to contribute, be acknowledged for you contribution, to give and get respect, ask for and give fair play, and an equal exchange that will bring about lasting win-win situations and effective professional meetings.