

Assertive Communication Handout

This handout contains additional information on delivering and composing assertive messages. Additional information and a highly recommended reference is *People Skills*, by Robert Bolton (1987).

Assertive Message Components

Assertive messages contain three parts: behavior, feelings, and effects. The behavior is a nonjudgmental description of the behavior to be changed. The feelings part is a disclosure of the asserter's feelings. This component may be implied and may not always be stated directly. The effects part is a clarification of the concrete and tangible effect of the other person's behavior on the asserter.

For example, consider a situation where a deployed telecommunicator and a resident telecommunicator are situated at a dispatch terminal. The deployed team member just learned how to use the system, which is much different than they are familiar with, and the resident telecommunicator is overseeing and to assist as necessary. The deployed telecommunicator unintentionally goes to the wrong radio frequency screen and causes a delay in responding to an emergency responder in the field. As a result, the resident telecommunicator blurts out: "You don't have a clue to what you are doing; this was a mistake". How could the deployed telecommunicator respond?

- TC (aggressive): Quit yelling at me. If I'm so wrong I'll just quit and let you run your own show. I don't want to be here anyway.
- TC (assertive – with feelings): When you only point out the negative and don't have patience with me, it not only discourages me, but doesn't enable me to learn how to do things right.

Consider another example where you have just taken a call for a fairly serious incident. You believe you have gathered enough information for a response; however the call was disconnected before you could obtain a contact phone number for the calling party. Upon receipt of the call for service, the resident telecommunicator blurts out: "These two streets don't even intersect. I have no idea where this call is and you didn't even get a call back number! What kind of training program did you go through?"

- TC (aggressive): Don't blame me! How would I know the layout of your streets!
- TC (assertive – with feelings): When you criticize me for not knowing the streets of your city it makes it difficult to concentrate on the task at hand. I really want to master this so you can feel comfortable taking a break, so if you can help me by showing me a map or street directory I can reference so I can try to avoid this the next time.

It is important to remember deployed telecommunicators may not experience aggressive situations and assertive communication techniques may not be required. The assertive communication techniques were introduced to provide a brief introduction to an alternative means of effective communication if the need arises. Serious problems should always be referred to the team leader.

Assertive Message Delivery

Delivering an assertive message may require the sender of the message to recognize his/her biases, faults, and other shortcomings, which often does not happen. There is generally a very fine line between being aggressive and assertive with many telecommunicators. Additionally, telecommunicators should not expect assertive messages to solve every problem the first time. Therefore, it is important that an assertive person remain objective when delivering an assertive message, acknowledge any faults, and remain focused on the behavior of the other person. Assertive messages contain six different components: preparation, sending the message, silence, reflectively listening to the defensive response, recycling, and focusing on the problem.

- Preparation - Before sending an assertive message, the sender must determine whether the message infringes on another's personal space/rights, whether the behavior being addressed is consistent behavior (occurring continually), if rapport has been developed with the person, and whether an assertive message is likely to change behavior. In some cases, an assertive message is not likely to result in behavior change and other techniques.
- Sending the Message - The message is often sent without a significant amount of "small talk" and is often directly to the point. Body language should confirm the message tone: eye contact should be made by looking at the person in the eyes, the sender's posture should be upright and leaning slightly forward, and the sender's facial expression should be consistent with the message.
- Silence - After the message has been sent, remain quiet. Allow the receiving person to interpret and understand the message. The amount of silence will ultimately depend on the particular situation.
- Reflectively Listening to the Defensive Response - The sender should listen to any message sent by the receiver. Caution should be exercised at this point. Some people will launch an aggressive offensive, ask questions, or try to side-track the assertive person. Listen to the person's message. The message may provide new information and consequently move the assertive message in a new and positive direction. Debates should be avoided and deflected; focus on the behavior and the solution. An assertive person may find it necessary to make repeated assertions (broken record) to bring the other person back to the focus of the dialogue. The assertive person should use "fogging" to avoid taking the defensive response personally. Fogging refers to an assertive person's ability to deflect or ignore personal characterizations or attacks by the other person and refrain from rewarding the behavior. If the other person criticizes the assertive person and there is some truth to the criticism, the assertive person should recognize and admit fault. The focus should remain on the behavior and the solution, while treating the person with respect.
- Recycling Steps - The assertive person may need to repeat the process several times until the other person recognizes the behavior or the matter is resolved. The number of reiterations may vary depending on the situation.
- Focus on the Solution - An effective assertive message does not force the person into a yes/no response and allows the person an opportunity to take appropriate action. Compromise on the part of the assertive person and the other person may be one solution. The assertive person must ensure the solution meets his/her needs and should not be overly concerned if the other person is excited about meeting the needs of the assertive person. Once a solution is determined, the assertive person should paraphrase the solution back to the other person and always thank the other person.