



ASSERTIVENESS

Assertiveness Skills

Abstract

This program is designed to assist leaders who are struggling with assertiveness skills to achieve greater success in becoming more assertive.

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Learning Outcomes

- Define assertiveness in relational and leadership contexts.
- Recognize assertiveness as a balance between self-respect and respect for others.

Defining Assertiveness

Assertiveness is the ability to express one's thoughts, feelings, and needs clearly, confidently, and respectfully, while also honouring the rights, boundaries, and perspectives of others.

It's not about being forceful or dominant; it's about being grounded in self-awareness and relational integrity.

Assertiveness allows leaders to communicate with clarity and compassion, set healthy boundaries, and foster trust without compromising authenticity.

Lesson 1: What is Assertiveness?

Becoming Assertive

Developing assertiveness is a gradual process rooted in self-awareness, emotional regulation, and intentional practice.

It begins with recognizing one's own needs, values, and boundaries, without judgment or apology, and learning to express them with clarity and respect. A person cultivates assertiveness by shifting from reactive patterns (like avoidance or aggression) to proactive communication, using tools such as "I" statements, active listening, and boundary-setting techniques.

Confidence grows through small, consistent actions: saying no without guilt, asking for support, or voicing disagreement constructively. Over time, assertiveness becomes less about confrontation and more about authentic connection, where one's voice is used not to overpower, but to empower.

Reflective Activity: "My Voice, My Value"

Think of a time when you felt truly heard and respected. What made that moment stand out? What did you say or do that helped you express yourself clearly?

a) Write 3-5 sentences describing the situation

b) What personal value was being honoured?

c) What communication style did you use?

Assertiveness Style Self-Check

Rate yourself on a scale of 1–4 (1 = rarely, 2 = seldom, 3 = sometimes 4 = often):

Statement	1	2	3	4
I express my opinions even when they differ from others.				
I say “no” without feeling guilty.				
I ask for what I need clearly and respectfully.				
I listen actively and validate others' perspectives.				
I maintain eye contact and calm tone when speaking.				

Tally your score and reflect:

a) *Where do I feel strong?*

b) *Where do I want to grow?*

Lesson 2: BECOMING ASSERTIVE

(45 mins)

Learning Outcomes

- Distinguish assertive communication from aggressive and passive styles.
- Understand the emotional and relational impact of each style.

Three typical Behavioural Types

There are four typical behaviour types, and most people will default to one or the other in difficult situations.

Passive Behaviour

Passive behaviour involves avoiding conflict and suppressing one's own needs, often out of fear of rejection or discomfort.

Individuals who communicate passively may struggle to say "no," hesitate to express opinions, or defer to others even when it compromises their wellbeing.

For example, a team member who consistently agrees to take on extra tasks despite being overwhelmed might say, "It's fine, I'll manage," even when they're silently resentful.

Over time, this can lead to burnout and a lack of clarity in relationships.

Aggressive Behaviour

Aggressive behaviour is marked by dominating communication that disregards the feelings, boundaries, or perspectives of others. It often stems from a need to control or protect oneself through forceful expression.

An aggressive colleague might interrupt others in meetings, raise their voice, or use blame-laden language like, "You clearly don't know what you're doing."

While it may achieve short-term results, aggressive behaviour erodes trust and creates fear-based environments.

Passive-Aggressive Behaviour

Passive-aggressive behaviour combines indirect resistance with avoidance of direct confrontation. It often manifests as sarcasm, subtle sabotage, or withholding information.

For example, an employee who disagrees with a decision but doesn't voice it might say, "Sure, whatever you think is best," then miss deadlines or fail to follow through.

This style can be confusing and damaging, as it masks true feelings and undermines relational transparency.

Assertive Behaviour

Assertive behaviour is the healthy middle ground, where individuals express their thoughts, feelings, and needs clearly and respectfully, while also considering others. Assertive communicators use "I" statements, maintain calm tone and body language, and invite dialogue.

For example, a leader might say, "I'd like to share a different perspective on this strategy. Can we explore it together?"

This approach fosters trust, clarity, and psychological safety, making it a cornerstone of emotionally intelligent leadership.

Conclusion

Style	Description	Typical Behaviours	Impact on Relationships
Passive	Avoids expressing needs or opinions to prevent conflict.	Withholds opinions, says "yes" when they mean "no", avoids eye contact.	Builds resentment, creates confusion, weakens self-esteem.
Aggressive	Expresses needs or opinions in a forceful, disrespectful way.	Interrupts, blames, uses threats or sarcasm, dominates conversations.	Creates fear, damages trust, escalates conflict.
Passive-Aggressive	Indirectly expresses anger or resistance while avoiding direct confrontation.	Uses sarcasm, silent treatment, procrastination, subtle sabotage.	Breeds mistrust, confusion, and emotional distance.
Assertive	Expresses needs and opinions clearly and respectfully, while honouring others.	Uses "I" statements, maintains calm tone, listens actively, sets boundaries.	Builds trust, clarity, and psychological safety.

Activity: Case Study: "The Team Meeting"

Sipho interrupts others and dominates the conversation. Thandi stays silent even when she disagrees. Lerato speaks up respectfully and invites others to share.

- Who is being assertive?
- What are the risks of Sipho's and Thandi's styles?
- How might assertiveness shift the team dynamic?

Could possibly do this as a scenario-based case study via H5P

Activity: Convert Aggressive statements to Assertive Statements

"You never listen to me." → "I feel unheard when I speak. Can we find a better way to communicate?"

"This is your fault." → "I'd like us to explore what went wrong and how we can fix it together."

Lesson 3: Importance of Boundaries at Work

(60 mins)

Learning Outcomes

- Understand boundaries as essential to trust and psychological safety.
- Learn how to set and maintain boundaries with clarity and compassion.

Boundaries protect energy, time, and emotional wellbeing.

Boundaries are essential guardians of our energy, time, and emotional wellbeing. They act as invisible lines that define what we are willing to accept, tolerate, and invest in, both personally and professionally.

When we set clear boundaries, we protect our energy from being depleted by constant demands, interruptions, or emotional labour that isn't ours to carry.

Boundaries around time help us prioritize what truly matters, reduce overwhelm, and create space for focused, meaningful work.

Emotionally, boundaries allow us to stay grounded in self-respect, preventing guilt, resentment, or burnout that often arise when we overextend ourselves.

Honouring boundaries is not selfish, it's a courageous act of self-care that models psychological safety, clarity, and mutual respect for others.

There are 7 types of boundaries we should be aware of:

7 Types of Boundaries

PHYSICAL Involves personal space, privacy and body autonomy,	EMOTIONAL How emotionally available you are and managing emotional responses,	TIME How you allocate your time and manage commitments.	MENTAL Your freedom to maintain your own thoughts, beliefs and opinions,
	MATERIAL Involves decisions about your possessions and finances,	CONVERSATIONAL Deals with topics you are comfortable or uncomfortable discussing,	INTERNAL Relates to self-regulation and managing your energy levels.

Healthy boundaries are proactive, not reactive.

Healthy boundaries are proactive, not reactive, because they are rooted in clarity, not crisis.

Proactive boundaries emerge from a deep understanding of our values, needs, and limits. They are intentionally designed to protect our energy, time, and emotional wellbeing *before* conflict or burnout occurs.

When we set boundaries proactively, we communicate expectations clearly, model self-respect, and create environments where others feel safe to do the same.

Reactive boundaries, on the other hand, often arise in response to stress, overwhelm, or violation. While they may be necessary in the moment, they tend to carry emotional residue such as, resentment, frustration, or guilt, because they weren't established early enough to prevent harm.

This can lead to abrupt decisions, strained relationships, or inconsistent leadership behaviours.

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Proactive boundary-setting is an act of emotional intelligence. It requires self-awareness, foresight, and the courage to articulate what is and isn't okay, *before* the pressure mounts.

It's the difference between saying "I'm unavailable after 6 PM to recharge" versus "I can't take this anymore, stop messaging me at night."

The former builds trust and predictability; the latter may protect you temporarily, but it can erode relational safety if it becomes a pattern.

Proactive boundaries are not walls; they're bridges. They invite dialogue, foster mutual respect, and reinforce accountability.

They help teams thrive by reducing ambiguity and emotional leakage, allowing everyone to operate from a place of clarity and choice.

Saying "no" is a skill, not a weakness.

Saying "no" is a skill, not a weakness, because it reflects clarity, courage, and self-respect.

The ability to say "no" is not about rejection or resistance, it's about alignment. It's the conscious choice to honour your values, protect your energy, and stay true to your priorities.

When we say "no" with intention, we're not closing doors, we're choosing the right ones to walk through.

Many people associate "no" with conflict, guilt, or letting others down. But in reality, a well-placed "no" can be one of the most respectful and empowering things we offer - to ourselves and to others.

It prevents overcommitment, reduces emotional leakage, and creates space for deeper, more meaningful "yeses."

Mastering this skill models boundaries, integrity, and psychological safety. It shows that it's possible to be compassionate *and* clear.

Saying “no” requires emotional intelligence. It asks us to pause, reflect, and communicate with grace. It’s not about being rigid, it’s about being rooted.

A reactive “yes” often stems from fear: fear of disappointing others, fear of missing out, fear of being judged. But a grounded “no” comes from strength: the strength to choose wisely, lead authentically, and honour what matters most.

“No” is not a wall, it’s a doorway to intentional living. It’s a skill that can be practiced, refined, and celebrated. And when we embrace it, we cultivate cultures of clarity, trust, and mutual respect.

Activity: “Boundary Mapping”

List 3 areas in your work life where you feel stretched, drained, or disrespected.

For each, ask:

- a) What boundary is missing or unclear?

- b) What would a healthy boundary look like?

c) What's one step I can take to reinforce it?

Tool: Boundary Conversation Planner

Use this template to prepare for a boundary-setting conversation:

Context	Need	Request	Follow-up
"I've noticed that..."	"I need to protect my time/energy by..."	"I'd appreciate it if we could..."	"Let's check in next week to see how it's going."

Lesson 4: Obstacles to Assertiveness

30 min

Obstacles are an inevitable part of life and leadership. Whether they arise from external circumstances or internal patterns of thought, how we respond to them shapes our outcomes and often, our sense of self.

A minor challenge can become a major disruption if met with reactivity or fear. Conversely, a thoughtful and emotionally intelligent response can transform even the most difficult moment into an opportunity for growth.

The key lies in our awareness: recognizing the nature of the obstacle, understanding our emotional response, and choosing a course of action that aligns with our values and goals. Not every obstacle requires the same response. The context, the stakes, and our inner state all influence how we show up.

Understanding Negative Thinking Patterns

Negative thinking can quietly undermine our confidence, distort our perceptions, and limit our ability to pursue meaningful goals. Unlike positive thinking, which often requires intention and effort, negative thoughts tend to arise automatically, especially when shaped by past experiences or environments that lacked emotional safety or affirmation.

These thought patterns often centre around three domains:

- **Self** – how we view our own worth and capabilities
- **Others** – how we interpret relationships and social dynamics
- **The Future** – how we anticipate outcomes and possibilities

Unchecked, these patterns can contribute to anxiety, pessimism, and self-sabotage.

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Below are common types of negative thinking that may surface when facing obstacles:

Type of Thinking	As the thinker, you...
Overgeneralization	Draw broad conclusions from a single event
Global labelling	Use harsh, fixed labels to define yourself
Filtering	Focus only on the negative, ignoring the positive
Polarized thinking	See things in extremes—either perfect or worthless
Self-blame	Take responsibility for things beyond your control
Personalization	Assume everything reflects on you, often negatively
Mind reading	Believe others are judging or rejecting you without evidence
Control fallacies	Feel either overly responsible for everything or powerless to change anything
Emotional reasoning	Assume your feelings reflect objective reality

Recognizing these patterns is the first step toward shifting them. As we move through this module, you'll learn how to challenge these thoughts and replace them with more balanced, empowering perspectives.

Assertiveness is not about being forceful—it's about being authentic. When practiced with emotional intelligence, it strengthens confidence, deepens relationships, and empowers us to navigate life's challenges with grace and purpose.

Case Study: Navigating Assertiveness in Relationships

Let's explore a real-world scenario that highlights how obstacles, especially relational ones, can impact goal pursuit.

Sue Smith, a respected financial analyst, has been encouraged to apply for a managerial role. She's excited and capable, but when she shares the news with her husband Joe, she's met with resistance:

- "How do you know you can perform that job with your experience?"
- "Who will look after the kids while you're stuck at work late into the evening?"
- "Don't I make enough money to support this family without you having to be away even more?"

Sue feels conflicted. She values her family deeply, but she also wants to grow professionally. She's hesitant to assert herself, fearing it may disrupt the harmony at home.

Let's help Sue craft assertive responses that honour both her aspirations and her relationship:

- "I appreciate your concern, Joe. I've thought carefully about this opportunity, and I believe I'm ready to take on the challenge."
- "We've always worked as a team. If I take this role, I'd love to explore how we can share responsibilities differently to support each other."
- "This promotion isn't just about income—it's about growth, fulfillment, and setting an example for our children about pursuing what matters."

These statements reflect clarity, empathy, and consistency—hallmarks of emotionally intelligent assertiveness.

Personal Application: Practicing Assertiveness

Each of us encounters moments where assertiveness becomes the bridge between intention and action. Whether in the workplace, at home, or within ourselves, the ability to speak up with respect and conviction is essential to achieving our goals.

In this section, you'll be invited to:

- a) Reflect on a personal obstacle you're currently facing

- b) Identify any negative thinking patterns that may be influencing your response

- c) Practice crafting assertive statements that align with your values and desired outcomes

Lesson 5: Practical Tools for Becoming Assertive

(60–90 mins)

Learning Outcomes

- Apply assertiveness in feedback, delegation, and conflict.
- Build a personalized assertiveness toolkit.

Assertiveness is a practice, not a personality trait.

This means that to become more assertive takes practice, practice, practice, ...

How do I know if I need to be more assertive and set boundaries?

Here are some signs that would indicate your boundaries are being eroded:

5 Signs you need to set boundaries at work.

- You feel like you are being pulled in multiple directions.
- You feel uncomfortable when asking for time off.
- Work often bleeds into your personal life and time.
- Your relationships start suffering.
- You feel burned out



What do I need to do to set boundaries?

There are 4 steps you can take to set boundaries:

STEP 1: Identify your boundaries - Reflect on your limits to understand what you can and cannot do in terms of workload, interactions, and time constraints

STEP 2: Communicate them clearly - Express your boundaries clearly and confidently to your colleagues and supervisors, using respectful language

STEP 3: Set expectations early - Establish boundaries at the beginning of projects or working relationships to prevent misunderstandings

STEP 4: Enforce and Revisit - Consistently enforce your boundaries and be prepared to revisit and adjust them as necessary



Practicing these steps, over time, will make setting boundaries and being more assertive easier.

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Harvard published the following **Tips for setting boundaries**.

TIP	EXPLANATION
1. Set clear agreements up front	Agreeing on terms beforehand helps everyone understand expectations and reduces resistance
2. Mention your credentials	Briefly mentioning your expertise adds authority to your boundary setting, helping reinforce your position and gain respect
3. Expect your boundaries to be challenged	Understand that boundaries will be tested and decide when to stick to them or make exceptions. Reset boundaries as part of the negotiation
4. Ask Questions	Ask clarifying questions before committing, to understand the full context. This ensures your boundaries are well-informed and respectful
5. Try not to use the word "NO"	Use indirect ways to say no by offering alternatives, maintaining the relationship while setting boundaries
6. Don't overexplain when you say "no"	Keep your refusal simple to avoid unnecessary arguments and maintain a strong position. Too much explanation can weaken your stance
7. Reset agreements after a crisis	Emergencies require flexibility, but it is important to re-establish boundaries once the crisis is over. This helps maintain long-term boundaries.

Assertiveness thrives in clarity, empathy, and consistency.

Assertiveness thrives in clarity, empathy, and consistency, because it is not just a communication style, but a relational practice.

Clarity is the foundation of assertiveness. When we speak with precision, about expectations, boundaries, and intentions, we remove ambiguity and create psychological safety. Clarity allows others to understand where you stand, what you need, and how you operate. It's not about being rigid; it's about being transparent and grounded.

Empathy is what makes assertiveness relational rather than transactional. It ensures that while you express your own needs, you remain attuned to the emotions and perspectives of others. Assertiveness without empathy can feel cold or dismissive, but when paired with emotional intelligence, it becomes a bridge for connection.

Saying, "I need to protect my time this week" becomes more powerful when followed by, "I understand you're under pressure too, how can we support each other?"

Consistency is the glue that holds assertiveness together. It builds trust over time by showing that your boundaries and values are not situational or reactive, they're intentional and reliable. When we are consistent in how we communicate, follow through, and respond to challenges, we model integrity.

Inconsistency breeds confusion: consistency fosters respect.

Together, clarity, empathy, and consistency transform assertiveness from a skill into a leadership presence. It becomes a way of being that invites dialogue, strengthens relationships, and cultivates cultures of trust.

Scenario Practice: "Giving Feedback"

You need to give feedback to a colleague who missed a deadline.

Draft your response using the **CLEAR** model:

- **Clarify:** "I want to talk about the missed deadline."
- **Listen:** "What happened from your side?"
- **Empathize:** "I understand things were hectic."
- **Assert:** "We need to meet deadlines to maintain trust."
- **Reflect:** "How can we prevent this next time?"

Tool: Assertiveness Action Plan

Create your weekly practice goals:

- One situation where I'll speak up
- One boundary I'll reinforce
- One assertive phrase I'll use
- One reflection at week's end

Reflections for action:

Our Reflections are often the most powerful part of the learning process

It would be a pity to forget them. Use this Work page to record things which you have learnt during the workshop and which you want to put into Action.

	Action	Who what when
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