

Assertiveness Is the Key to Work-Life Balance

1st April 2020

Striving for a healthy balance between the demands on your life in and out of the office means setting clear boundaries, and that usually requires assertive behaviour. Assertiveness is a skill and, like any skill, it can be learned and it must be practised. It includes:

- expressing your feelings
- communicating effectively
- establishing your limits and boundaries

When setting boundaries, it is often necessary to say, "no" to some tasks and people. Saying "no" can feel uncomfortable, rude, and even aggressive or hostile, and some people find it difficult to stand up for themselves. They may find it hard to ask for what they want, or they may never have learned how to express their preferences, needs, opinions and feelings tactfully or effectively. However, learning how to be assertive and establish boundaries in all areas of your life is key to establishing a healthy balance.

Use the tips provided below to practise assertive communication skills in lots of different situations. Soon, you will be able to call upon these skills automatically, and it will become easier and more comfortable to set boundaries and achieve balance.

1. Learn to identify and voice your worries and concerns. It is the first step to acknowledging and expressing your feelings and preferences in a positive way.
2. Boost your self-esteem. Do things and be with people that make you feel good about yourself.
3. Learn to use "I feel" statements to express your thoughts and feelings, especially in situations of conflict. An "I feel" statement sounds like this: "I feel... (state feelings) when you/or a certain situation... (state facts)." "I would like.... (state your requirements, needs, preferences)."
4. Accept compliments graciously by saying, "thank you" rather than making excuses or downplaying your own success.
5. Ask, "why?" as much as you can—not to be difficult or challenging, but instead to establish your own thoughtful response to the accepted norm. Try not to accept rules, policies or practices unquestioningly, without determining if they make sense to you or are in line with your own values.

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6. Learn what your triggers are. We all have them: certain people, situations, or things that 'set us off' and prevent us from behaving with composure. Once you identify these people, places, and things, you can find ways to deal with them.
7. Find healthy ways to express your negative emotions, such as requesting better service in a restaurant, letting people know when they've hurt your feelings, discussing your differing views on a book or a movie, or asking to have some time for yourself or privacy when you need it.
8. Deal with minor irritations before your anger builds.
9. Learn to begin, engage in, and end conversations comfortably. If you are unsure of yourself in social situations, look up books and online resources on etiquette and personal development; or join a club or group like Toastmaster's where you can interact with others and practise social skills among people who share common interests. If you are extremely shy or anxious in social situations, consider contacting your organisation's assistance programme for some professional guidance on overcoming this common problem.
10. Learn 'active listening' skills and apply them. Focus on what others are saying; repeat what they say in your own words, and ask questions to make sure you understand. Wait until the other person has finished speaking before speaking yourself.
11. When you do have something to say, speak up clearly and state your case with confidence. Learn to use your voice and be aware of your body language so that you appear calm and in control, but not threatening or aggressive.
12. Let go of perfectionism. No one is always right. If at times you think you don't measure up, be gentle with yourself (and others). You are doing the best you can.