



BUSINESS BOOK Summaries

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Assertiveness

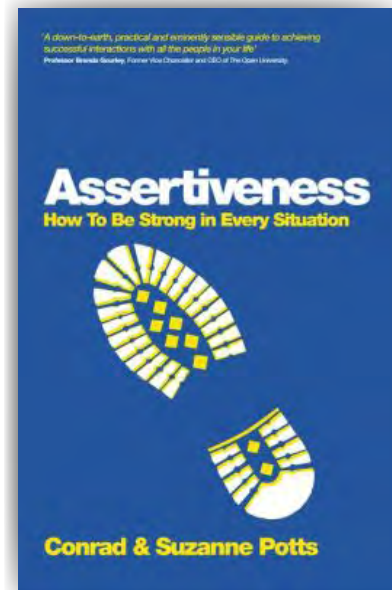
How To Be Strong in Every Situation

Conrad and Suzanne Potts

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KEY CONCEPTS

- *Assertive people place their needs on equal footing with the needs of others.* This means that neither party to an interaction is superior or subordinate to the other. Both participants are entitled to state their needs, listen to the needs of others, and expect mutual acknowledgement.
- *The goal of assertion is a win-win outcome.* Assertion has the potential to change confrontational interactions to cooperative exchanges. It is not about achieving wins over others, but creating wins that benefit others.
- *Assertive people identify and challenge any beliefs they may hold that are disempowering and generate faulty thinking.* Negative, unproductive beliefs—often formed at an early age—can undermine assertive behavior. These beliefs can be changed or replaced by realistic, positive thinking.
- *Assertive communication requires accuracy both in conveying messages to others and in understanding the messages received from them.* Verbal and non-verbal elements of communication are equally important to ensure clarity and comprehension.
- *An assertive workplace communicator knows how to say “no.”* While a can-do attitude is often helpful, saying “yes” to every request can sabotage a career because it leads to unfulfilled commitments.
- *Assertive managers are skilled in delivering feedback to their staff members.* Criticism is much more common than praise. Managers who redress this balance in favor of positive feedback are more likely to get the productive staff behaviors they want to replicate.
- *Assertion gives control over difficult interactions by removing anger and encouraging participants to think.* Aggression is normally the result of people losing

control over themselves or situations. Assertive communicators are able to calm the opposing parties so problems can be solved constructively.

- *Assertion helps manage the fears of participating in meetings and making presentations.* By delaying their participation in meetings and presentations, non-assertive people make these tasks unnecessarily difficult.

INTRODUCTION

Many people conduct their daily interactions without understanding how to make the most of them—or how to avoid confrontations and communication breakdowns. The key is *assertiveness*: a worldview, behavior strategy, and set of techniques that enables its users to get more of what they want by acknowledging, respecting, and accommodating the needs and wants of others. As Conrad and Suzanne Potts argue in **Assertiveness**, those who practice this approach will almost always be happier and more successful than those who fall back on aggression or non-assertiveness. Assertion can be applied in virtually any context, helping its users improve their relationships, job performances, and self-confidence.

WHAT IS ASSERTION?

Assertiveness is a behavior that gets individuals more of what they want. However, unlike simple forcefulness, it requires acknowledgement and consideration of what other people want. Assertive people express their points of view honestly and directly while seeking to achieve outcomes that satisfy both parties.

Two other common behaviors, often chosen as alternatives to assertiveness, are *aggression* and *non-assertion*. Aggressive people seek to enhance their positions at others' expense. They are typically hostile, contemptuous, or patronizing. Sometimes this type of behavior gets the results sought by the aggressor, but it can also elicit opposition and dislike.

Non-assertive people believe that their needs and wants are viewed as less important than those of others. This behavior is based on fear and unwillingness to take responsibility. It leads to manipulation and damages the non-assertive individual's confidence and self-esteem.

Each of the three behavioral types is based on a different worldview. An aggressive individual believes that attacking others and displaying superior strength is the only way to survive in a hostile world. Non-assertive people see themselves as unimportant and believe the only way to stand up for themselves is to manipulate others or make them feel guilty.

In contrast, assertive people believe they can express their needs and wants without attacking those of others. They take responsibility for their behaviors, perceiving that they can win without causing someone else to lose. Alone among the three behaviors, assertion fosters a "win-win" perspective.

WIN-WIN

Everyone engages in negotiation, whether it is at work, at home, or in their family lives. People can choose among four possible negotiation strategies:

1. *Win-lose*: Customers get what they want, but at the company's expense. In the short term, the customer is happy, but in the long term the company cannot survive.
2. *Lose-win*: The company makes money by short-changing its customers. This approach damages customer loyalty and eventually undermines the business.

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3. *Lose-lose*: Both parties get less than they want. Neither is satisfied, hurting the company's sustainability.
4. *Win-win*: Both parties get enough of what they want to feel satisfied, including value for customers and a fair price for the company. Everyone is willing to continue the relationship.

A win-win strategy will produce the most constructive, desirable outcome in any negotiation. Achieving win-win scenarios requires five steps:

1. *Hold assertive beliefs*. Before a win-win can be achieved, the negotiator must believe that it is possible.
2. *Establish needs and wants*. Negotiators must be clear about what they need and what they would be satisfied to achieve.
3. *Establish others' needs and wants*. Asking questions of other parties is the best way to learn what they hope to achieve.
4. *Get agreement on both sets of needs and wants*. Called a "verbal handshake," this is the point where everyone accepts that both sets of needs and wants have validity.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Conrad and Suzanne Potts have been motivational speakers, management trainers, and coaches for over 25 years. They have appeared in a number of TV programmes and training videos associated with assertiveness, team building, and leadership. They have delivered assertiveness training around the world, working with people from diverse cultures from Pakistan to Paris, Sydney to Stockholm, and Moscow to Manchester. Both are founding members of TeamSkills, a network of management and leadership consultants dedicated to the development of individual and corporate excellence.

5. *Create solutions*. Certain kinds of questions encourage the other party to help create a win-win solution. For example:

- "How about this as an idea?"
- "What could be an alternative?"

Win-win can often be confused with compromise. However, in a compromise, one or both parties may feel they gave away too much. In a win-win outcome, everyone's needs have been recognized and taken into account. This leads to a shared sense of commitment and a more sustainable solution.

Remember that faulty thinking is the first stage in developing unhealthy and negative feelings that drive behaviour and give you results you don't want. Faulty thinking is often a rehearsal for failure and is self-fulfilling!

IT'S ALL IN THE MIND

Assertiveness is an attitude that is based on a set of beliefs. A *belief* is a guiding principle that filters one's perception of the world and enables or limits one's behavior.

Aggressive or non-assertive beliefs limit or constrain those who hold them. Aggressive beliefs assume superiority over other people, and non-assertive beliefs suggest the holder is less than equal to others. In contrast, assertive beliefs enable growth and self-confidence by assuming the holder deserves just as much respect and communication as everyone else.

Beliefs can arise from many sources, including one's childhood, important people, social and cultural influences, or traumatic events. But it is possible to develop assertive beliefs by using a 12-step process:

1. Analyze situations with unsatisfactory outcomes.
2. Identify and write down any limiting beliefs related to the situations.
3. Challenge those beliefs.
4. Identify the origins of those beliefs.
5. Identify the benefits of holding those beliefs.
6. Identify and write down preferable assertive beliefs.

7. Identify the benefits of holding the assertive beliefs.
8. Identify the permissions that holders of the assertive beliefs need to give themselves.
9. Identify what holders of the assertive beliefs need to tell themselves.
10. Act assertively.
11. Be assertive in simple contexts.
12. Reflect on and realize the effectiveness of the new beliefs.

Assertiveness depends on being aware of and acting on one's rights as an individual. For example, people have the right to decide for themselves, make and learn from mistakes, refuse requests, and say "no" without feeling guilty.

Additionally, assertive people exert some control over the way they talk to themselves, usually at a subconscious level. If one's internal conversations are negative and faulty, they may make one pessimistic, anxious, resentful, and defeatist. But by bringing this self-talk to one's conscious attention, one can challenge the negative perspective and substitute a positive, realistic, can-do outlook.

. . . [W]hen you speak, remember your body is talking as much as your mouth is. We can recognize aggression, non-assertion and assertion, both from the actual words, the language, and the non-verbal behaviour we use.

ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION

Assertive communication is the ability to transmit a message that other people can understand—and to receive someone else's message so that it is understood. Ultimately, the goal of communication is not only to share information, but also to create relationships by establishing rapport.

However, effective communication is often derailed because people's words convey different messages than their body language. Making both verbal and non-verbal elements of communication convergent will boost impact, influence, and understanding.

Certain characteristics of body language are typical of assertive, non-assertive, and aggressive commu-

nication. Recognizing these characteristics can help in correctly interpreting how someone is thinking or feeling. For example, some postures and gestures associated with the three styles include:

Postures:

1. *Assertive*: Open, relaxed, feet placed firmly on the floor and head held up high.
2. *Non-assertive*: Collapsed or nervous movements, shrugs, and shuffles.
3. *Aggressive*: Tightening of the body, increasingly rigid and static movements.

Gestures:

1. *Assertive*: Hand movements are measured, firm, open, and encouraging.
2. *Non-assertive*: Hand-wringing, hunched shoulders, tapping fingers.
3. *Aggressive*: Head in the air, arm thrusts, chin tilts, fist thumps.

When body language is used to gauge emotions and intentions, clusters of behaviors—such as postures, gestures, and facial expressions—are more reliable indicators than individual elements. However, even clusters can be misinterpreted, so it is important to know the behavioral patterns normal to a particular individual. When communicating over the telephone, voice patterns can be effective substitutes for body language.

Similarly, the impact of written communication can be affected by the choice of words, phrasing, and visual devices such as punctuation, spaces, underlining, and italics.

Using communication to build rapport is a critical life skill for many reasons, including:

- Rapport increases impact, memorability, and influence.
- Rapport builds trust.
- In the presence of rapport, people are more likely to be open, sharing, and supportive.

One way to establish rapport is through assertive listening, which demonstrates respect for and interest in

another's needs and opinions. It also encourages reciprocity; in other words, an assertive listener is more likely to be listened to by others. To be effective, assertive listening needs to be both verbal and non-verbal. Some key techniques are:

- Using positive body language, such as relaxed posture, direct eye contact, and pauses, that allow others to complete their thoughts.
- Using summary language that shows people they have been heard or recaps agreements.
- Testing understanding to demonstrate interest in others' points of view with questions like, "What does the problem look like from your perspective?"

The challenges of communicating with different people require different assertive options. Three lower levels of assertion are sufficient for most day-to-day situations. But if these are insufficient to achieve communication goals, there are also four higher levels of assertion.

Lower levels:

1. *Basic assertion:* This is a straightforward statement of the speaker's opinions, feelings, or needs.
2. *Questions assertion:* Asking questions can help in comprehending another person's perspective or situation.
3. *Empathy assertion:* This combines a show of understanding with a statement of the speaker's needs or opinions, as in "I know the job is difficult. Still, it must be completed today."

Higher levels:

1. *Discrepancy assertion:* This is a statement pointing out the differences between a previous agreement and the current situation.
2. *Negative feelings assertion:* This is a description of the bad impact on the speaker of the other person's behavior.
3. *Sanctions assertion:* Here, the other person is informed of what will happen if he or she does not change his or her behavior.

4. *Process assertion:* If all else fails, there may be a hidden agenda or unspoken issue. This approach aims to uncover such silent obstacles, using phrases like "If something else is going on, can we discuss it?"

RESPECT AT WORK

Learning to say "no" is a key part of getting respect at work. While everyone wants to be seen as helpful, always saying "yes" can sabotage careers. That is because people's credibility and reputation will suffer when it becomes impossible to deliver on every promise.

It is important to be concise and committed when saying "no." Body language must support the seriousness of the refusal. Words like "maybe" and "perhaps" should be avoided.

Handling put-downs is another part of getting respect. People who make these hurtful comments feel bad about themselves and want others to feel bad too. While responding in kind may seem appropriate, this often leads to a retaliatory spiral. Instead, assertive individuals must use techniques to stop put-downs in a way that maintains their self-respect. Once the negative comments come to an end, it can be helpful to praise the person who made them for turning to alternative approaches.

The most practical way we show that others are valued is by actively and assertively listening to them. Assertive listening allows you to show, despite the other differences, that the other person is valued in the deepest possible way—a pre-requisite for establishing rapport with anyone.

GETTING THE BEST OUT OF PEOPLE AT WORK AND HANDLING DIFFICULT BEHAVIOR

There are several common indicators of performance issues:

- Customer complaints are increasing.
- Team members are distrustful of each other.
- Team members argue and avoid responsibility.
- Morale is suffering.

Often, the root of such problems is a failure to give feedback effectively. For example, negative feedback

is usually more common than praise. Praise is best given close in time to the event that elicited it, while criticism is most constructive when focused on the future instead of the past. If a situation merits both praise and criticism, the two types of feedback should be decoupled so that each gets adequate attention.

. . . [I]t is your right and responsibility to challenge poor products and services. The win-win in these contexts is that you get value for your money and the service provider has an opportunity to put things right, retain customers and remain in business.

Aggressive co-workers can be difficult to handle because their views and concerns are not easily understood. They may avoid making decisions or issue commands without explanation. To defuse aggression, individuals can use the 4 Ps:

1. Pause in order to listen to the other person.
2. Probe with open questions to make the person think and help identify the real problem.
3. Posture that conveys strength.
4. Pace that is slow enough to engage the person firmly, but in a caring way.

BEING ASSERTIVE IN MEETINGS AND WITH FAMILIES

Even top performers may fall short when they must participate in meetings or make presentations. In addition to causing them anxiety and frustration, this problem can undermine their relationships with peers and result in coworkers doubting their competence.

The root of the problem is usually fear; people want to contribute, but are so afraid of poor performance that they delay getting started until it becomes a difficult challenge. The following strategies can help manage this fear:

- *Enter early.* The earlier an individual contributes to a meeting, the easier it is to break the ice. If numerous presentations are scheduled, making the first one will be especially advantageous.
- *Practice assertive active listening.* Offering feedback based on careful listening encourages the speaker and helps create goodwill.

- *Signal intention.* This communication technique—letting people know that their contributions are imminent—is a nonaggressive but effective way to get attention. Signaling language might include phrases such as, “So to clarify what was just said...” or “To summarize...”

- *Choose where to sit.* Sit close to the table, in a position that is visible to all participants.
- *Work on body language.* It is attention-getting to lean forward or otherwise change posture when one is ready to speak.

When making presentations, it is helpful to focus on the desired outcome. Most importantly, presentations should be short and simple because people tend to remember only what is said during the first and last few minutes.

Basic assertive techniques can also help resolve some of the tensions that build up in families. Among these are:

1. *Listening.* In domestic situations, it can be tempting to be either nonassertive to avoid arguments or aggressive to demonstrate authority. But the most effective approach is to listen, acknowledge, and understand the other person’s perspective without interrupting.
2. *Clarify expectations of children.* Assertive statements, such as “Everyone should pull their weight by sharing the chores” or “In the future, please take on this responsibility” can help head off arguments and resolve misunderstandings.
3. *Clarify expectations of partners.* Instead of assuming that a spouse or partner knows what is best in a given situation, it is more constructive to assertively clarify expectations using phrases like “This is what is causing our problem and here is what can be done about it.”

SOCIAL OCCASIONS AND GETTING GOOD SERVICE

As with families, interactions with friends or neighbors during social occasions can break down because of inadequate assertiveness. Openly discussing expectations and boundaries will go a long way toward relieving the stress that builds up in such situations.

People must also take charge when they are having trouble getting good service. Some indicators of bad service include:

- Service delays are mounting.
- Others' priorities are addressed first.
- No one provides information without being asked.

If nothing is done to address such issues, they are sure to continue. Therefore, assertively challenging bad service is critical; otherwise, providers will assume that their minimal efforts are adequate. While remaining calm and polite, it is effective to use phrases such as:

- "Let's organize a face-to-face consultation."
- "These are the problems being caused by this service."
- "We need to talk about the delays in this work."

Praising service when it is good is just as important as challenging it when it is bad. A customer who specifically points out how the provider has helped will be remembered, appreciated, and served even better in the future.



FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Estimated Reading Time: 3–4 hours, 232 pages

Assertiveness by Conrad and Suzanne Potts is a motivational and practical guide to effective expression—both verbal and non-verbal—in every sphere of life. Using real-life stories and devices like "Wake-up Calls" and "Options," the authors give readers food for thought and help them identify ways to become more assertive in their own lives. There are numerous exercises, illustrations, and easy-to-implement suggestions. The chapters in Part One should be read sequentially, as this material lays the groundwork for understanding assertive communication. The chapters in Part Two may be read in any order depending on the reader's need for guidance in particular work, home, or family settings.

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