

Assertion Theory

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A friend asks to borrow your new, expensive camera.... Someone cuts in front of you in a line.....A sales person is annoyingly persistent.....Someone criticises you angrily in front of you colleagues.....

For many people these examples represent anxious, stressful situations to which there is no satisfying response. One basic response theory being taught more & more frequently in training programs is a theory called Assertiveness or Assertion. Some important aspects of Assertion Theory includes (1) the philosophy underlying assertion, (2) the three possible response styles in an assertive situation,(3) some means of outwardly recognising these response styles,(4) some functional distinctions between the three styles, & (5) the six components of an assertive situation.

The Philosophy of Assertion

Assertion Theory is based on the premise that every individual possesses certain basic human rights. These rights include such fundamentals as “the right to refuse requests without having to feel guilty or selfish,” “the right to have one’s own needs be as important as the needs of other people,” “the right to make mistakes,” and “ the right to express ourselves as long as we don’t violate the rights of others ”.

Three Response Styles

People relate to these basic human rights along a continuum of response styles: non-assertion, assertion and aggression.

Assertion: The act of standing up for one’s own basic human rights without violating the basic human rights of others is termed assertion. It is a response style that recognises boundaries between one’s individual rights and those of others and operates to keep those boundaries stabilized. When one of her friends asked to borrow Jan’s new sports car for a trip, she was able to respond assertively by saying, “ I appreciate your need for some transportation, but the car is too valuable to me on loan out.” Jan was able to respect both her friend’s right to make the request and her own right to refuse it.

Non-assertion: The two alternative response styles represent an inability to maintain adequately the boundaries between one person’s rights and those of another. Non-assertion occurs when one allows one’s boundaries to be restricted. In Jan’s case, a non-assertive response would have been to loan the car, fearing that her friend might perceive her as pity or distrustful, and to spend the rest of the afternoon wishing she had not. Thus, Jan would not have been acting on her right to say no.

Aggression: The third response style, aggression, takes place when one person invades the other’s boundaries of individual rights. Aggression , in Jan’s, might sound like this: “you’ve got to be kidding!” Here, Jan would be violating the other’s person’s right to courtesy and respect.

Recognizing Response Styles

Emotion: The person responding nonassertively tends to internalize feelings and tensions and to experience such emotions as fear, anxiety, depression, fatigue, or nervousness. Outwardly, emotional “temperature” is below normal, and feelings are not verbally expressed. With an aggressive response, the tension is turned outward. Although the aggressor may have experienced fear, guilt, or hurt at one time in the interchange, this feeling has either been masked by as “secondary” emotion such as anger, or it has built up over time to a boiling point. In an aggressive response, the person’s emotional temperature is above normal and is typically expressed by inappropriate anger, rage, hate or misplaced hostility—all loudly and sometimes explosively expressed. In contrast to the other two response styles, an individual responding assertively is aware of and deals with the feeling as they occur, neither denying himself the right to the emotion nor using it to deny another’s rights. Tension is kept within a normal, constructive range.

Nonverbal Behaviour: Each response type is also characterized by certain nonverbal or body language cues. A non assertive response is self-effacing and dependent; it “moves away” from a situation. This response may be accompanied by such mannerisms as downcast eyes, the shifting of weight, a slumped body, the wringing of hands, or a whining, hesitant, or giggly tone of voice. Aggression represents a non-verbal “moving against” a situation; it is other-effacing and counterdependent. This response may be expressed through glaring eyes, by leaning forward or pointing a finger, or by a raised, snickering, or haughty tone of voice. Assertion, instead, faces up to a situation and demonstrates an approach by which one can stand up for oneself in an independent or interdependent manner. When being assertive, a person generally establishes good eye contact, stands comfortably by firmly on two feet with his hands loosely at his sides, and talks in a strong, steady tone of voice.

Verbal Language: A third way of differentiating between assertion, nonassertion, and aggression is to pay attention to the type of verbal being used. Certain words tend to be associated with each style. Non-assertive words can include qualifiers (“maybe”, “I guess” “I wonder if you could” “would you mind very much” “Only” “just”.....) Aggressive words include threats (You’d better” “If you don’t watch out”) put downs (come on, you must be kidding) evaluative comments (“should” “bad”), and sexist or racist terms. Assertive words may include “I” statements (“I think” “I feel” “I want”), cooperative words (“let’s” “how can we resolve this”) and empathic statements of interest (“what do you think”, “what do you say”). Emotional, non-verbal, and verbal cues are helpful keys in recognizing response styles, but they should be seen as general indicators and not as a means of labelling behaviour.

Functional Distinctions: Outwardly, the three response styles seem to form a linear continuum running from the non-assertive style, which permits a violation of one’s own rights, through the assertive style; to the aggressive position, which perpetrates a violation of another’s rights. Functionally, however, as indicated in Figure, non assertion and aggression look both very much alike and very different from assertion. Nonassertion and aggression are dysfunctional not only because they use indirect methods of expressing wants and feelings and fail to respect the rights of all people, but also because they create an imbalance of power in which the two positions may mix or even change positions with each other. In refusing to stand up for more rights, the non assertive responder creates a power imbalance by according everyone else more rights than himself, while the aggressive responder creates a power imbalance by according himself more than his share of rights.

This power imbalance is unstable; the restricted non-assertive responder can accumulate guilt, resentment, or fear he becomes the aggressive responder in a burst of rage, or he may mix a non-assertive “front” with a subversive “behind the scene” attempt to “get back” at the person. The assertive responder seeks a solution that equalizes the balance of power and permits all concerned to maintain their basic human rights. Thus an imbalance of power, caused by a failure to respect the rights of all people and perpetuated by the use of indirect methods, creates a very vulnerable position

for both the non-assertive and the aggressive responders, while the more functional assertive responder respects all human rights, uses direct methods, and seeks a balance of power.

Components of an Assertive Situation

Assertion theory can be helpful in situation in which a person is anxious about standing up for his basic human rights. These situations include saying yes and no with conviction, giving and receiving criticism, initiating conversations, resisting interruptions, receiving compliments, demanding a fair deal as a consumer, dealing with sexist remarks and handling various other specific situations encountered in one's personal, social, and professional life. A person may feel capable of being assertive in a situation but make a conscious decision not to be so, because of such things as power issues or the time or effort involved. Before making a decision to be assertive, it is helpful to examine the six of an assertive situation.

1. The potential asserter's basic human rights and his level of confidence that he has these rights.
2. The specific behaviour to which the potential asserter is responding.
3. The potential asserter's feeling reactions to this specific behaviour.
4. The specific behaviour the potential asserter would prefer.
5. The possible positive and negative consequences for the other person if he behaves as the potential asserter wishes him to behave.
6. The potential consequences of the assertive response for the potential asserter.

Once the situational asserter components have been determined, assertion training techniques provide a means of formulating and enacting an assertive response.

Conclusion

Assertion Theory offers a model for those who wish to stand up for their own rights without violating the human rights of others. It is a model that can be used in all type of situation personal, professional, and social to facilitate honest, direct, functional communication.