

## Why Communication Style Matters

Communication style is a very personal attribute that each of us develops over time. Our ability to flex that style is what allows us to communicate more effectively with people who may have a different style than our own. Understanding this and developing the skills to shift our style can impact our relationships and our ability to influence others. In my coaching practice I have noticed many clients have may tend to go to one end or the other of the spectrum of styles...either very aggressive and driving or very passive and accommodating. Neither is right or wrong just different and can miss the nuances that allow people to operate a bit more, in the middle. This especially comes in to play when expressing or identifying your needs, such as in a project, setting deadlines, negotiating a job offer, etc. Having an assertive style of communication, which lies in the middle, can often serve you well.

Many of my clients struggle with being assertive which I define as a way of communicating that defines my needs and wants as having the same level of importance as another person's needs and wants. This differs from the aggressive style where they define their needs/wants above another's or the passive style where they put their needs/wants below another's. There are times when all three styles are appropriate and our ability to navigate between the three styles can be crucial to our success and our personal brand as a leader. The style that is usually never appropriate is passive aggressive. I don't think I need to explain what that looks like!

When clients struggle with assertiveness, I often recommend Randy Paterson's book, *The Assertiveness Workbook*, which is accurately named because there are over 50 exercises in the book. As you know, if you want to enhance your communication style you have to

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practice it and his book gives practical exercises to enhance your level of assertiveness. Assertiveness is centered around being present, learning to control your own behavior, respecting yourself and respecting others. Most people need reminding of the fact that they can't control other people's behavior. As a leader this fact is essential to accept. You also must believe that anyone has the capacity to change. Unfortunately, change doesn't not happen in a straight line; everyone makes mistakes while learning. It is the self-awareness of noticing the mistake that lets you know you are on the right path.

It is said that we communicate 55% of our message via nonverbal clues...facial expressions, posture, tone, etc. Nonverbals can relay your emotional state, how you feel about the topic or person, how important you think the topic is or how you view yourself in relation to the situation. The list below looks at how the four communication styles are conveyed without using language. Think about your own nonverbal messages. Are you demonstrating the appropriate style for the situation? What could you do differently to enhance your level of assertiveness?

## Nonverbal Communication

- **Tone of voice:** Assertive has a medium or warm pitch whose words are conversational versus aggressive which is loud and fast paced, passive which is soft and hesitant, and passive-aggressive which is sarcastic and fluctuates pace.
- **Gestures:** Assertive gestures are open, rounded gestures versus aggressive which are big and sharp, passive which twist and fidget, and passive-aggressive which are jerky and quick.
- **Facial expression:** Assertive facial expressions appropriately match the message while maintaining eye contact versus aggressive which show tension while glaring, passive which are anxious and avoids eye contact, and passive-

aggressive which are innocent and exaggerates eye contact.

- **Posture:** Assertive posture is relaxed with symmetrical tall stance versus aggressive which is inflated to take up more room than others, passive which shrinks to take up less space, and passive-aggressive which has asymmetrical stance like standing with hand on hip.

Another way I suggest reviewing the communication styles is to reflect on how you react to criticism or feedback that doesn't match our own sense of ourselves. The goal is to not automatically react and instead take a deep breath and give it some thought to allow logic to be part of the encounter. Criticism can ignite fear, anger and shame which can cause a natural response of denial, defense or counterattack. To develop skills for coping with criticism, try the following exercise from Paterson's book.

## Responses to Criticism

Reflect on a negative feedback situation that you did not handle as well as you would have liked. Spend some time looking at it from different angles. Review the following ideas and ask yourself which ones you utilized during the encounter.

1. **Relax, listen and wait:** Did you relax, breathe and not freeze up? Did you listen to all that was said instead of switching to thinking and rehearsing response?
2. **Validate their perception and emotions:** Did you acknowledge with words that you understand how the other person saw the problem? Did you acknowledge the fact that they there must have been a reason for bringing it up?
3. **Narrow and specify:** Did you ask for more information to get a clearer picture of specific issue? Did you avoid generalizing the criticism and applying it to you as a person?
4. **Don't try to change their mind?** Did you remind yourself that you do not have to agree? Did you stop yourself from arguing endlessly to change their opinion?
5. **Thank the critic:** Did you appreciate the feedback on your role and not take it personally? Did you verbally respond that you had heard them and welcome feedback?
6. **Don't demand perfection:** Did you stop yourself from criticizing their delivery instead of listening to their message? Did you stop yourself from finding fault in them as a way of deflecting blame off yourself?
7. **Hold back:** Did you recognize unhealthy criticism and stop yourself from getting upset?

Did you remind yourself that aggression is a communication style and sometimes people choose the wrong style and you do not have to match your response to the one they chose?

8. **Ask for clarification:** Did you ask for more information and other times they observed the issue? Did you repeat what you thought you heard to be sure you were on the same page?
9. **Agree in part:** Did you admit you are not perfect? Did you understand that you might need to improve in one area without exaggerating it to be about your entire performance? Did you realize that the feedback is their truth and may not be 'THE TRUTH.?'
10. **Ask for time:** Did you recognize when you need time to process information or detach emotionally before responding? Did you listen with intent that you would be willing to put in effort and time to evaluate alternative ways you could have handled the situation that led to the criticism?

Building your level of assertiveness and the range of communication styles you can demonstrate can significantly improve your performance as a leader/manager. As an executive coach, I can help you evaluate your communication style at work and in other areas of your life. By asking questions, I can help you understand your hidden beliefs and fears that are influencing your communication style. Together we can proactively look at situations and find ways to be assertive. My goal as a coach is for clients to take charge of their own lives and responsibility for their own actions. By focusing on increasing when you use the assertive style, you decrease your emotional responsiveness of fight (aggressive) or flight (passive.)

If you'd like to develop your skill in asking questions and being more of a Coach/Leader, the next Coaching Clinic workshop is Oct 16 & 17, in Memphis. Sign up for Coaching Clinic. The Clinic can also be conducted for specific organizations or groups. If you'd like to explore this or one of the other services Harmony provides, don't hesitate to contact me at [bburtch@harmonycc.net](mailto:bburtch@harmonycc.net), 901-272-7390.

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## *Schedule of Public Courses*

The following courses are being offered to the public by Harmony Coaching & Consulting. Click on the associated link for more information on the program or to register.

Course Title	Date(s)	Time	For More Information/Registration
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[The Coaching Clinic](#)

[Oct 16 & 17](#)

[8:30 am – 5:00 pm](#)

