

Becoming Self-ful: *Assertive Communication At Work*

by Mimi Donaldson

Do you find it difficult to express what you want and need to the boss? Are you unable to respond when you think you should? Are you frustrated by your powerlessness in some day-to-day interactions?

The art of confidently and comfortably expressing your wants and needs without hurting or being hurt is a crucial skill. Few of us learned the art of assertive communication from our families. As a result, we are ill-prepared to meet the challenges of the workplace, where people need to get results through other people. Priorities compete for attention and the “squeaky wheel” (often the overly aggressive person) gets the grease, especially in an ego-driven environment.

The most important issues in life are about needing or not needing the people we work with. It's about confronting, “assuming,” standing one's ground and, most of all, about courage. It's about choosing. We have to choose between telling the truth to someone who needs to hear it, or keeping the truth tucked away and unsaid. We must choose between being comfortable and safe, or risking discomfort and even the loss of some of our perceived popularity. We also choose every day, between our hot-button responses (“You can take this job and shove it”!) or the appropriate response suited to our long-term purpose.

Patience and Hot Buttons

Maturity is a measurement of patience: how long you can put off immediate gratification. We all know that you must put off a hot-button response (“I'm just sure ... does it look like I have four hands?”) for a long-term result. Being patient involves self-confidence. There are three different behaviors to choose from:

1. **Selfish:** Since that time long ago when we whiningly started a sentence with “I want” and our mother called us “selfish,” we have been fighting that label. We've gotten it confused with “aggressive,” “pushy” — worse terms when applied to women.
2. **Selfless:** This is the non-assertive person who avoids conflict, at all costs. They “wimp out” of calmly expressing needs and wants. This person is not confident of their rights as an employee and as a human being. Some of these rights are: to be treated with respect; to be listened to and taken seriously; to have and express feelings and opinions; to ask for what you want; and to get what you pay for (how many of us have paid for a bad haircut—and given a tip?). When we act selfless, we become a natural victim for every aggressor. They ignore our subtle signals of martyrdom, and attend to their own priorities at our expense. People who ask, “Got a minute?” end up taking half an hour because we wimp out of saying no.

3. **Self-ful:** This is a word I created. It doesn't mean "full of yourself." It stands for a person confident enough of their rights to be assertive: to ask for what they need and want without hurting other people. This takes skill and practice. It is the art of saying "no" to people and having them thank you for it. Don't think it's possible? Assertive, "self-ful" people use a three-step action method. Here's an example:

Tom knocks on top of your cubicle partition, leans in, and asks, "Got a minute?" Instead of glancing at your watch and saying, "OK" with a martyred sigh, you look up and analyze the request. You see his lower lip trembling and his eyes filling with tears. You know he wants to talk about his divorce — again — and you have a report to finish. You recognize this will not be a 60-second interruption, no matter what he said. You resist the reflexive "hot buttons" response ("In your dreams, pal") because you depend on Tom in your job. A rapport with him is a priority for you. Take the following three steps:

Acknowledge: Use six-second empathy to tell him you understand how he feels and what he wants. "Tom, you look upset—it looks like you need to talk." This calms him, because now he doesn't have to work to make you understand. You have said, in essence, "I understand your priority — and it's important."

Advise: Let him know your priority — calmly, "self-fully." You start out, "Tom, here's the situation. I have a report to finish for the boss, and it's due in half an hour." You have understood his need, and now you're asking him to understand yours. Many people, when told of your priority, will back off. But not Tom. That's why there's a third step.

Accept or Alter: Accept the interruption with time limits ("I can give you five minutes") or suggest an alternative or option ("I'll come to your cubicle when I've finished the report").

What about the Boss?

With peers, you have the "alter" option; Tom will actually thank you and go away happy. With the boss, your best option is almost always to accept. The boss' priorities are your priorities—it's in the job description. However, don't leave out the second step. Always advise the boss of your activities and priorities. Sometimes you are keeping them informed and they're grateful. And sometimes they want you to do it all anyway. This is when negotiation comes into play. But never skip step two.

That's the "Self-ful" Step.

Being self-ful allows you to speak up and say what is important to you. It even allows you to correct the boss when you notice an error. Better sooner than later. Remember—bosses hate surprises.