

Assertive Communication: The Middle Ground Between Passive and Aggressive

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Three ways to respond, and only one that works well

When a leader disagrees with a decision, needs to set a boundary, or has to raise an uncomfortable issue, there are broadly three ways to communicate it: passively, saying nothing or softening the message until it disappears; aggressively, pushing the point forcefully with little regard for how it lands; or assertively, stating the point clearly and directly while still respecting the other person. Of the three, assertive communication is the one most reliably associated with being both heard and respected, yet it is the one many leaders find hardest to sustain under pressure.

Why leaders default to the other two

Passivity often comes from a reasonable but miscalibrated instinct to avoid conflict or preserve a relationship. It feels safer in the moment, but it tends to leave the underlying issue unresolved, and over time it can quietly erode a leader's credibility, since people notice when concerns are never actually raised. Aggression, meanwhile, often comes from urgency or frustration; it gets a point made quickly, but it frequently damages trust and invites defensiveness rather than genuine agreement. Leaders under sustained pressure often oscillate between the two, staying quiet for too long and then, when the frustration builds, overcorrecting into a sharper tone than the moment calls for.

What assertive communication actually sounds like

It is built on a few consistent habits. It states the issue directly, without excessive hedging or vague language: "I don't think this timeline is realistic," rather than "I'm not sure, maybe, it could possibly be a bit tight." It uses first-person framing rather than accusation: "I'm concerned this approach will create a bottleneck," rather than "you're creating a bottleneck." It is specific about what is being asked for, rather than leaving the other person to guess: "I'd like us to revisit the deadline before Friday," rather than simply expressing dissatisfaction and hoping it is picked up on.

A practical structure

A simple, well-tested structure, sometimes summarised as a DESC script (Describe, Express, Specify, Consequence), developed within assertiveness training literature going back to Sharon and Gordon Bower's work in the 1970s, remains useful today: describe the specific situation factually, express how it affects you or the work without exaggeration, specify clearly what you would like to happen instead, and note the genuine consequence or benefit of that change. This keeps a difficult message concrete and actionable rather than vague or emotionally charged.

Where leaders most often slip

Under time pressure or in front of senior stakeholders, many leaders drop the "specify" step, raising

a concern but never stating clearly what they actually want to happen, which leaves the conversation without a real resolution. Others skip straight to a solution without first describing the situation clearly, which can make the request feel arbitrary rather than grounded in an observable issue. Practising the full structure, even briefly in your head before a difficult conversation, tends to produce noticeably clearer outcomes.

Assertiveness is not a fixed trait

Many leaders assume assertiveness is a personality trait some people simply have and others do not. In practice, it is closer to a skill with identifiable components, direct language, calm tone, clear asks, that can be practised and strengthened over time, including by naturally conflict-averse or naturally more forceful leaders alike. The goal is not to become a different kind of person, but to build a reliable, respectful way of saying what genuinely needs to be said.