

ASSERTIVE VERSUS AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

Staff in Professional Relations Services respond daily to calls from members seeking advice on dealing with aggressive and intimidating colleagues. To effectively deal with such ongoing situations, it is first of all essential to understand the behaviour of the threatening individual. Secondly, it is necessary to develop a plan of action which may require taking risks in changing how you typically respond to such situations.

If you normally respond passively to such individuals because you fear reprisal or rejection, you become the victim and the situation will worsen. Don't give them that kind of power over you! The situation has to change and you are the one who has the capacity to do that! If you do nothing, your stress level will lead to more serious issues for you and your students. Prolonged stress causes poor performance, moodiness, relationship issues and physical illness. You may not be able to change the "bully" but you certainly can and need to change the negative impact they are having on you!

Difference between assertive and aggressive behaviour

Many people believe that assertive and aggressive behaviour means the same thing. The first step in managing difficult people at work is to clear up this confusion.

Aggression

The dictionary defines aggression as:

- 1) Any unprovoked attack.
- 2) An act or attitude of hostility, usually arising from feeling of inferiority or frustration.

Aggression whether physical, verbal or psychological, is destructive to both self and others. Nobody enjoys a bully!

Aggression is an approach used to make you feel better by forcing your point of view on others, hurting their feelings and building resentment toward you. Every day educators intervene in student bullying situations. Yet these same individuals may allow themselves to be emotionally devastated by a colleague who is treating them in exactly the same way.

Assertion

The dictionary defines assertion as:

- 1) A positive statement; declaration.
- 2) An insisting on one's right, a claim, etc.

To assert one's self means to put oneself forward; make oneself noticed, especially in insisting on one's rights. An assertive person is able to stand up to others and deal with each issue at hand.

Assertiveness skills can be learned and will not only resolve many interpersonal problems but will build confidence, self-respect and improved relationships with peers.

What not to do: remain passive

As stated earlier, many individuals express anxiety and fear of repercussions if they "rock the boat". Probationary teachers often state that they fear an unsatisfactory evaluation from an intimidating principal. Others do not want to be alienated on staff. Or they think that others should already know how they are feeling! To this we say, "beware of assumptions that have not been checked out." Contact your Federation to discuss the situation. Be careful not to confuse "keeping the peace" with remaining "passive".

What not to do: fight aggression with aggression

Feeling like being aggressive? Think twice! How is this going to end up? Aggression is emotion out of control and can be very destructive. A sudden anger burst, verbal threats, shouting match while feeling good at the moment, serves only to belittle or hurt others and certainly sets a poor example for your students! This in turn can lead to complaints about you, allegations of verbal abuse toward students and colleagues and cause serious harm to your professional reputation and relationships. Two wrongs don't make a right! This is when it's time to go for a run or talk out your frustrations in a safe place. Remove yourself from your situation.

Well then what do you suggest I do? Going for a win-win result

It's now time for you to practice being assertive. Your goal will be to make clear with confidence your feelings, needs and expectations while acknowledging the needs of the other.

Your intent is to move forward to a more positive working environment.

Practice makes perfect

- Decide what it is that you hope to achieve.
- Write down what you wish to say about your current feelings, needs and expectations.
- Consider how this will affect others on staff.
- Discuss your thoughts and share your plan with a friend, family, and/or Federation.
- Rehearse in private what you intend to say.
- Request a meeting one-on-one for a time that is mutually convenient.

Preparing for the meeting

- If you are nervous practice deep breathing.
- Have an exit plan if the other party becomes too aggressive – “I'm feeling uncomfortable with your behaviour. I suggest we reschedule this meeting to a time when I might have a Federation representative with me”.

In the meeting

- Set ground rules – “I trust that we will each have the opportunity to speak and listen to one another”.
- Be concise – state your concern, its effect on you and what you wish to change.
- Listen to the other person's needs.
- Stay calm despite what the other may say.
- Be willing to compromise.
- Avoid blame, insults, put-downs.
- Focus your language statements about how the situation is affecting you and your ability to do good work for the students and the school community.
- Conclude the meeting with a specific plan for improved communication.

If taking steps to improve your situation stirs-up too much anxiety, contact Professional Relations Services for confidential advice and support.

You will always encounter people who have to argue about everything and impose their views aggressively on others.

However, there is another kind of person who calmly and confidently asserts themselves without hurting others.

Which do you want to be?

For more information, contact Professional Relations Staff at 416-962-3836 or 1-888-838-3836 at the provincial office.

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