



Conflict Resolution in Business Through Assertive Communication

An Online Continuing Education Course for Engineers

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Introduction

Within the dynamics of most workplace settings, the existence of effective communication is considered to be an essential and ongoing process that is required for operations to run smoothly on any given day. The success of a new or growing business can be highly dependent on how individuals are able to interact with one another on an ongoing basis effectively. The ability to foster healthy working relationships can increase the likelihood to a company's success. First and foremost, this should include the establishment of effective communication styles (Cangelosi & Peterson, 1998).

Conflict resolution has become an integral aspect of most business ventures whether on a domestic or international level as it is an underlying indicator as to whether a company will thrive for many years to come. Communication, both verbal and nonverbal, is a behavior that humans engage in throughout the course of their lives, and often the different behavior that people can elicit can be taken for granted when issues of discourse or conflicts arise (Cangelosi & Peterson, 1998; Hynes, 2011). Communication is regarded as an important part of being assertive, and this may not be recognized when it comes to conflict-related matters that arise in the business-oriented workplace (Boomer, 2008). When engaging in communication, the message is believed to be more effective when it is delivered assertively and as the potential to increase the likelihood of achieving a desired outcome that is clearly supported (Kolb & Griffith, 2009).

In addition, communication is viewed as a social activity that requires the coordinated efforts of two or more individuals for it to transpire, but differing communication styles and opinions may at times produce conflicts (Salerno, 2002). Whether communication exists on an intrapersonal, interpersonal, or an organizational level, it is viewed as a necessity in order to achieve successful

operational outcomes and to resolve issues that may arise during moments in the workplace where conflicts can arise for any number of reasons, whether personal or professional in nature (Hynes, 2011). Research has illustrated that effective communication can play a vital role in improving performance and productivity.

As different perspectives and personalities come together within the framework of a business setting, opposition between members can exist. An appropriate resolution of the underlying conflict within the business setting can only lead to the reinstated pursuit of shared goals through collective effort which can be the driving force for a company's success (Ibid.,2013). When conflicts arise, open communication must exist between the involved parties, and as business ventures are moving toward a more global economic approach where larger volumes of work of a complex nature have to be accomplished within a short span of time, measures must be in place to address disagreements that can develop within a group dynamic (Dionne et al., 2004).

The practice and utilization of assertive communication includes the ability to present one's feelings and thoughts in a clear and concise manner; thus helping to alleviate conflicts that may arise in the business setting. An individual has the potential to adopt and mold the approach they take to determine what works best for them. An effective conflict resolution strategy is to put one's words into what is felt, rather than focusing on what the other person has done wrong. This behavior is vital to maintaining the cohesiveness and structure of any business environment and proper implementation can help to resolve either minor or major issues that may arise because it is recognized as a desirable form of social communication (Kubany et al., 1992).

What does it mean to be assertive?

Assertive behaviors can be defined as the “expression of feelings, preferences, and opinions” in a manner that is both direct and respectful to the rights and opinions of others, and can prove to be instrumental in diffusing significant conflicts that can develop within the business setting (Kowalski, 1998; Kubany et al., 1992, pp.337). The ability to engage in assertive communication is generally equated to the ability to speak and interact in a manner that is considered to be respectful of the rights and opinions of others while at the same time being able to stand up for one’s own rights, needs, and personal boundaries (Pipas & Jaradat, 2010).

The use of assertive communication to achieve conflict resolution in a business environment can be viewed as an appropriate strategic approach because it creates opportunities for open discussion to occur between individuals who have differing viewpoints or a variety of opinions, needs, and choices that can be heard in a respectful manner and considered in order to achieve a win-win solution for problems that arise (Pipas & Jaradat, 2010). If an approach is taken in an eloquent manner without being verbally aggressive or placing someone in a delicate position, it has the potential to leave room for productive discussions to occur.

Conflicts in the workplace tend to arise due to the inability to communicate, which can lead to frustration, disappointments, and subsequently create feelings of powerlessness (Perlow, 2003). The act of being assertive is not one that can come naturally to all individuals, but with practice and within the context of the workplace an individual can hone the necessary skills in order to be more effective with their style of communication.

Background on Assertiveness Training and Communication Techniques

Assertiveness training and communication has existed since the late 1950s in an effort to increase self-expression and has been employed in a variety of populations such as college students, employed adults, psychiatric patients, both genders, individuals, and groups (Bate, 1976; Kolb & Griffith, 2009). In the 1990s, it was not uncommon to find support staff being less assertive than they could have been in comparison to their senior manager or partners (Dallas, 2011). The characteristics that have been observed with assertiveness include individuals who are able to have their needs met in a positive and productive manner through the process of expressing their thoughts and needs in an explicit manner and speaking clearly so that the other individual understand their message (Kolb & Griffith, 2009; Pipas & Jaradat, 2010).

In addition, the thoughts and needs of the individual are expressed clearly, allowing for good eye contact, posture and tone to be present during the process. In the business sector, it is important for assertiveness during a conflict to demonstrate that the individual is direct, confident, and honest with their presentation (Kolb & Stevens Griffith, 2009). It must be clear that the sender recognizes that they have a choice during the interactions so that the receiver (e.g., business colleagues) respects the rights of the sender and accepts their differing viewpoints. The sender must also do the same when they are given the opportunity to express their viewpoints to the opposing side (Covey, 1989; Kolb & Stevens Griffith, 2009).

When engaged in a conflict in the business setting, the most appropriate method to take to ensure that the issue at hand is examined thoroughly before discussions begin about how to address the underlying issue. Once the issue has been identified, the next step would be to identify sources to serve as support for the issue or against the issue. Prior to engaging in the discussion, each side typically has a stance that they take which can serve as the primary reason that the conflict developed in the first place. For each side, a well-planned and logical response can be utilized to argue the opposite and provide support for one's line of reasoning. It is important that both sides

feel that they are being heard and their concerns will be addressed while working to avoid the escalation of the issue.

Assertive communication and behavior is considered to be the most effective way of solving interpersonal and professional problems because it allows for direct communication and honesty that allows an individual to receive messages without distortions and seeks to maintain positive future relations with others. In a business setting, interactions involve situations where one may be required to say no, to ask for favors, to make requests of others, and to express positive and negative feelings (Chapter 6, 2006).

During times of conflicts, the assertive communication strategies can be employed to promote resolution can include,

- 1) responding calmly and directly as soon as there is the realization that one's rights have been violated
- 2) focusing on specific behavior that comprised the rights by using "I statement."
- 3) sharing one's feelings that are experiences that resulted from a specific behavior, and
- 4) describing the preferred outcome and discuss how to handle future situations that may occur.

The end goal is to reach a point where all of the feelings and thoughts have been clearly expressed and work towards achieving a desirable outcome for the parties that are involved.

Dissection of Assertive Communication Style

When a potential conflict arises in any given workplace setting, the appropriate assertive communication style should consist of a combination of both a passive and aggressive style that allows for fairness and power. In an example scenario, two individuals may be fighting for their rights to uphold a business transaction, but in the process must attempt to remain sensitive to the rights of one another. In order for both sides to arrive at a compromise, there must be a balance between what each party wants to achieve in the end (Ames, 2008).

The assertive communication style allows an individual to argue their opinion during a conflict but without being overly aggressive or feeling embarrassed as they attempt to present their information to the other side. In an effort to be prepared for any potential future conflicts that may arise in the business setting, it is always appropriate to not wait until confronted with a conflict to strategize. If there is the anticipation of a conflict, it is best to plan for it and have a firm position that will result in a preferred outcome both sides (Willing

Key Components

In order to ensure a successful outcome, there are four proposed elements that were identified:

1. rejecting c
2. request fav
3. positive and
4. initiation, c

(Pipas & Jaradat, 20

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