Section 6: Influence in Communication

READING 9

www.tallistraining.co.uk/assertiveness_article.htm  (Accessed 13/12/2007).
Transformational assertiveness: what it is and how to use it

I was working in Manchester a few years ago. One night, as I came out of a restaurant I noticed a man walking towards me. As soon as he saw me he made a point of changing his direction so that he bumped into me. He immediately became aggressive, blaming me for the collision, telling me to be more careful and that I needed to be taught a lesson. I did not move away from him, stood my ground and immediately said, "Sorry about that – it was completely my fault". The man stopped being aggressive, looked puzzled for a moment, told me (once again) to be more careful in future and then walked off. In an instant the relationship between us had changed – been transformed into something more healthy for both of us.

On another occasion I was spending an evening at home when a neighbour living in one of the topmost flats turned the volume of her music way up high – to such an extent that my flat began to vibrate in sympathy. I went up to her flat, knocked on her door and when she answered I explained the problems her music was causing me and asked her to turn it down. My calm, reasonable, even voiced approach seemed to have no effect other than to make her angry and she told me, very loudly, that she had her rights and she would do as she wished, whenever and however she wished. At this point I began to feel angry myself and started to show it – my voice became louder and more pointed and my body language slightly more aggressive (pointing at her to emphasise that I needed her attention). Her response was to quieten down and start listening. I was then able to explain, once again calmly and in an even voice, the effect her music was having on me and that I really did need her to turn it down. I finished by pointing out that if the problem continued I would have no option but to complain to her landlady, which was not in her interests at all and something I would rather avoid, for her sake as well as mine. She listened, said nothing in response and closed her door. Almost immediately, I heard her turn the volume of her music down. Again, in an instant the relationship between the two of us had changed.

In both the above instances the quality of the relationship transformed almost immediately and resulted in positive outcomes for the other person and myself. During the first example the person who bumped into me got an apology and a boost to his self-esteem; I got out of the situation without a fight. During the second example the lady with the loud music avoided an unpleasant complaint going to her
Both of these examples show the effectiveness and hint at the potential power of transformational assertiveness. This style of assertiveness has always existed and has always been used by effective people, but because of its fluidity, difficulty to define, quantify and neatly explain, it has become undervalued and on the whole ignored. Instead, more easily explainable, quantifiable and stable notions of assertiveness have become fixed in our minds and the predictable, neatly packaged content of many a training course.

Unfortunately, like a lot of neatly packaged items, these traditional notions of assertiveness survive best within a vacuum and once opened up to the rich atmosphere of the real world they quickly degrade, failing to live up the expectations placed upon them. What seemed like good practice in the lean, clean environment of the classroom falls flat on its backside when faced with the earthy, chaotic diversity of many real life situations.

And it simply is not good enough to say to people who feel they are failing to be assertiveness that they just have to keep practising, keep taking the medicine (especially if the medicine is non-prescription strength or just a pleasant tasting placebo).

This article will:

- Explain the concept of transformational assertiveness and show how it differs from traditional views of assertiveness
- Offer 2 models to help people select and apply the assertiveness approaches best suited to the varied and sometimes unexpected challenges they face each day.

What is transformational assertiveness?

Transformational assertiveness, like people and circumstances, is fluid and flexible – looking and sounding different at different times. Transformational assertiveness is a chameleon that takes on the characteristics, emotional hues and colours that best suit the contexts and situations within which it finds itself. It taps into and uses - in a managed, conscious way - the strengths of the rich and varied behaviours and emotions associated with us and our naturally aggressive/passive environments.
If we consider the two examples given above we see transformational assertiveness in action. Firstly in a hopefully non – typical situation and secondly in one that is probably a little more common.

Notice what happens from moment to moment during each example. During the stand off in Manchester things start off with a physical collision and aggressive words and behaviour from the man who bumped into me. Then I respond: my body language is assertive; I do not draw away or flinch; I stand my ground. But what I say could not be more passive: “Sorry about that – it was completely my fault”. Now notice again the man’s response – how the man’s aggressive behaviour is immediately replaced by first puzzlement and then by a much more moderate rebuke, which is the pre – curser to him departing the scene.

In an instant the relationship between the man and myself has changed almost completely. From there being a real risk of some form of violence, we have arrived at a situation where we are talking fairly reasonably to each other and any physical threat is receding fast.

The key to this positive outcome was the matching of my assertive approach to the situation I found myself in. If I had behaved in an entirely passive way, flinching and backing away, it would probably have only invited more aggressive behaviour. If I had coloured my assertiveness with aggression, shouting at the man to keep away and even pushing him away, perhaps the outcome would still have been positive, but to my mind the risk of escalation into mutual violence would also have been increased.

If I had done assertiveness by the numbers, like it is often presented on training programmes, I would have seemed other worldly, ‘not on the same planet’ as the person on the receiving end of it. I would have been like ‘Mr Spock’ the Star Trek character, stating my rights and what I wanted the man to do in a logical, rational and objective manner. This approach would have had as much effect as a whisper in a land of shouting; I simply would not have been heard in what was an emotional, aggressive and anxious situation. The man would have probably dismissed or ignored what I said and carried on in the same vain as he had started in, until obtaining a response he could understand and respond to given the situation we were in.

What I chose to do (and choosing is key here) is use a style of assertiveness that took into account the anxiety and stress of the situation. I responded in a way that was understandable to the man and took account of the situation, but which did not indicate any loss of control on my part. My words were passive, but my body language was far from so. Hearing my passive words the man would know that I
had been made to feel defensive and very possibly anxious by his behaviour and actions, but seeing my body language he would also know that I was not ready to back off or give any more ground. In short my actions gave him two messages: yes, you have made me feel anxious; but no, I am not going to allow my anxiety to enable you to take any further advantage or liberties. He thought about these messages, realised that he could take a small boost to his esteem but probably not much else from the situation and then cleared the way for (what was in his mind) an honourable exit. As a consequence I avoided any physical harm (and perhaps even causing him any).

Now let us look again at the ‘loud music’ example. Here I knock on the door and make my assertive statements (Spock like) to the person playing the loud music. Notice the response. All it caused was an aggressive statement of the woman’s right, as she saw it, to do exactly as she wished. My comments were deemed so lacking in feeling, strength or commitment that she felt she could just override them by loudly stating her own right back at me.

Now notice what happened when I changed my assertive style to take account of the situation. I made my voice a little louder, became somewhat more pointed in my use of words and gestures and became clearer about the consequences for her of not listening to me.

Basically, I allowed some of my anger and feelings to show through.

The effect, as with the first example, was almost immediate. What I had to say registered with the woman as being strongly felt. She realised that I was giving her a chance to remedy things before telling her landlady. She quickly thought things through (withdrew - again similar to the first example) and the music volume was turned down. An outcome that was advantageous to me and also to her as she avoided any unpleasantness with her landlady.

**How transformational assertiveness differs from traditional assertiveness approaches**

Transformational assertiveness is fluid, flexible and adaptable to different contexts and situations. Traditional views of assertiveness are not.

Where transformational assertiveness seeks to directly tap into and use our emotions and behaviour to effectively address issues and situations, traditional assertiveness approaches seek to professionally package up these feelings and behaviours. They present them at one remove –
distantly and gently focusing on them through the artificial lenses of neat, neutral models that claim applicability to all situations.

I do not dismiss these techniques. They are based on good practice and act as helpful starting points; they are good ideas to keep in mind (see footnote). But because they are divorced from context and the direct and dynamic use of emotion, feelings and behaviour, they are limited in their effectiveness. They are effective only within neutral, controlled environments where their messages are not drowned out by the waves and perhaps even storms of others’ emotional behaviour. This is why these approaches are shown off to best effect within the laboratory like environments of most training courses.

**When and how to use transformational assertiveness**

So, when and how is transformational assertiveness best used? This question is most effectively addressed from a perspective that encompasses all the emotions and behaviours transformational assertiveness is likely to interact with. Consider this model:
Firstly, notice that the traditional approach to assertiveness, the one that is emotion neutral, rational, and uses standard techniques is furthest away from the dimensions of aggression and passivity. This goes a long way to explaining why it can sometimes be difficult to make this approach heard in difficult or emotional circumstances. It can feel like shouting from the top of a cliff during a storm to someone far away (and it will probably be just as effective).

Also, from the viewpoint of an aggressive person, the traditional approach to assertiveness may come across as weak, but from the viewpoint of a passive person it may come across as overly strong or even aggressive. Even to people who are not being particularly aggressive or passive traditional assertiveness may come across as unnaturally cold and somewhat insincere in its intentions, and lead to comments like: "Your using your assertiveness techniques again" and "You have just been on a course haven't you?" The artificiality of the traditional assertiveness style can be so obvious to people that it, rather than its message, becomes the focus of attention.

Now notice that the large triangle has been divided into two, one part called the "Area of Choice and the other the "Area of Non – choice". Whilst in the area of choice we are in control of our selves and can manage our emotions and the behaviour they lead to. Whilst in the area of non - choice we are not in control of ourselves and cannot manage the emotions we feel and the behaviour they lead to; we become instinctive in our responses and are either passive or aggressive.

The double – headed arrows signify the movement that we all make naturally between being aggressive, passive and assertive. They also point out that traditional, rational, technique based assertiveness sits at the extreme top of the triangle, whilst transformational assertiveness sits further down in the area of choice. Transformational assertiveness is therefore better placed to tap into the various characteristics of our aggressive and passive behaviour and our tendency to slide up and down between extremes of behaviour depending on the situations we encounter.

As long as we stay in the area of choice we can make effective use of the added drive, power and subtleties of expression that our emotions provide us with. If we stray into the area of non – choice, however, we lose control of our feelings and emotions and are carried whichever way they choose for us, be that passive or aggressive in nature.

**Applying the assertiveness triangle to everyday situations**
If we want to apply the assertiveness triangle to everyday situations involving others, we need first to recognise how people prefer to interact with us. Once we have this awareness we can start to make choices about the style of assertiveness we wish to use. Here is a model to help with this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Takers</th>
<th>Givers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic position is aggressive</td>
<td>Basic position is passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words and behaviour will be based on them winning and you losing</td>
<td>Words and behaviour will be based on them losing and you winning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Examples:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Words:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Words:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is your fault not mine</td>
<td>It is my fault not yours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalised comments and feedback</td>
<td>Habitually saying sorry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behaviour:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Behaviour:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitual pointing and aggressive pushing/dismissing gestures. Invasion of personal space and time.</td>
<td>Habitual nodding/bowing and agreeing. Conceding of personal space and time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Swappers</th>
<th>Sharers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic position is traditional assertive and based on the use of give and take transactions (not the sharing of emotions and feelings) to address the needs and wants of all concerned to create win/win situations</td>
<td>Basic position is transformational assertive and based on sharing not just wants and needs but also feelings and authentic behaviour in order to create win/win situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words and behaviour will be objective, rational and neutral</td>
<td>Words and behaviour will show the managed presence of feelings and emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Examples:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Words:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Words:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is what I need. What do you need? This is what I can offer. What can you offer?</td>
<td>That type of behaviour makes me feel very angry. What I need you to start doing is.... (assertive/aggressive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is not a matter of fault but of how we can both sort the problem out logically and effectively to our mutual</td>
<td>I just need to point out one small aspect of your behaviour that is annoying me a little. You might like to think about</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
advantage.

**Behaviour:**
Even toned and calm voice. Phrases carefully structured and balanced to show equitable concern for the needs of all. Open relaxed and attentive body language. Expressions of friendly neutrality.

trying.... (assertive passive).

**Behaviour:**
Raised or lowered voice. More pointed or softened expressions and body language to address emotional needs of individuals and the context of the situation.

The above model identifies four ways in which people can respond to others. You will notice that two types of assertive response have been included (swappers and sharers). This ensures that both traditional and transformational assertiveness are given explicit acknowledgement and attention.

The four types of response are:

1. **Takers:** Those who instinctively respond to other people and situations from the perspective of a Taker are habitually aggressive in their outlook and actions (please see the above table for examples of the words and behaviour they tend to use). Their fundamental position is about winning at others’ expense. At the extreme end of this behaviour are criminals of one sort or another. At the more moderate end are those willing to work within the boundaries of acceptable social and organisational behaviour, but only because they see this as a way of achieving their own needs. Takers will actively seek to use social and organisational rules to advance their own causes at the expense of those of others.

**Most effective assertive style**

When interacting with Takers the most effective assertiveness style is transformational assertive/aggressive.

Takers begin any interaction feeling impatient and assuming that their needs and views are paramount. They will look for any opportunity to become annoyed and angry at the situation and other people involved. Anyone dealing with a Taker needs to immediately level the playing field – to gain respect, attention and the time due to them. This cannot be done using traditional assertiveness, as the taker will automatically perceive it as lacking power – as being weak, passive behaviour. Transformational assertive/passive behaviour is definitely not appropriate. It would only be seen as a red rag to a bull, as an attempt
at appeasement deserving of nothing but increased aggressiveness in return.

An assertive/aggressive approach sends a clear message to the Taker that strength and commitment lie behind the words and that a subservient position and additional aggressive behaviour will not be tolerated. The assertive/aggressive posture needs to be maintained until the Taker shows signs that they are treating you and what you say with seriousness and respect.

2. Givers: Those who instinctively respond to people and situations from the perspective of a Giver are habitually passive in their outlook (please see the above table for examples of the words and behaviour they tend to use). Their fundamental position is about letting others win at their own expense. At the extreme end of this behaviour are those that habitually allow themselves to be abused or seriously taken advantage of. At the more moderate end are those who equate being personally effective with habitually going out of their way to meet the needs of others, even when this means neglecting their own needs (the proverbial willing horse that gets taken advantage of again and again, and again).

Most effective assertive style

When interacting with Givers the most effective assertiveness style is transformational assertive/passive.

Givers begin any interaction feeling anxious and assuming that their needs are secondary to the needs of others. They will look for opportunities to give in and/or give as much as they can as quickly as they can in order to stop feeling anxious. This is not an effective outcome for anybody concerned, as it invariably leads to further stress, anxiety, broken promises and non-kept commitments. When dealing with a Giver traditional assertiveness may come across as too formal, cold and off-putting. In some situations Givers may even perceive traditional assertive/aggressive as aggressive. Transformational assertive/aggressive would certainly be seen as very intimidating, even terrifying.

If the Giver feels uncomfortable with the way they are being dealt with, their stress and anxiety will increase and with it their habitual desire to agree to whatever it appears is being demanded. For this reason softened assertive/passive behaviour is most likely to result in effective outcomes for all concerned.

3. Swappers: Those who instinctively respond to people and situations from the perspective of a Swapper are traditionally assertive in their
outlook (please see the above table for examples of the words and behaviour they tend to use). Their fundamental position is about seeking win/win solutions wherever possible – they seek to meet their own needs and those of others. Swapper behaviour is usually characterised by ‘friendly neutrality’ and the use of recognised assertiveness and negotiation techniques. It does not, therefore, exhibit extremes of behaviour, but rather tends towards being more or less formal depending on personal style and context. It is characterised by a calm, predictable and sometimes somewhat stylised approach.

**Most effective assertive style**

When interacting with Swappers both the traditional and transformational assertiveness approaches are appropriate.

For a lot of interaction with Swappers, simply matching their style will lead to effective outcomes for those concerned (this approach can be seen in many organisational meetings). However, because Swappers start off any interaction feeling detached and neutral it is sometimes necessary to use transformational assertiveness of the assertive/aggressive variety. This is in order to be certain of engaging Swappers fully with the issues and their importance. Not emphasising issues in this way can sometimes lead to their true significance being missed or inadvertently ignored, as Swappers may have given them only superficial acknowledgement and consideration.

**4. Sharers:** Those who instinctively respond to people and situations from the perspective of a Sharer are transformational assertive in their outlook (please see the above table for examples of the words and behaviour they tend to use). Like those who are traditional assertive their fundamental position is win/win. They tend, however, to rely less on formalised, traditional assertiveness and more on a style that communicates feelings and explicitly takes account of situations and contexts. This helps Sharer messages cut through the distractions, perceptions and assumptions of the moment, making their meanings and significance much clearer to those on the receiving end.

**Most effective assertive style**

The most effective assertive response to a Sharer depends to a large extent on how they are interacting with you.

So, when interacting with Sharers it is important to notice their language and behaviour, as it will give you a good idea of how they perceive you and your approach towards them. You can then adjust your behaviour as seems most appropriate.
If a Sharer comes across as assertive/aggressive they probably perceive you as coming from a Taker point of view, or as a Swapper who needs to take more notice of what they are saying. If they come across as assertive/passive they probably perceive you as coming from a Giver point of view. Sometimes Sharers will adopt a traditional assertive approach because it mirrors the other person’s approach and best suits the situation (as during a formal meeting for example).

In essence a Sharer’s behaviour towards you gives clues as to where they see you on the dimensions of the assertiveness triangle:

If you are being seen as a Taker, Sharers will have placed you on the line somewhere near the aggressive corner of the triangle.

If you are being seen as a Giver, Sharers will have placed you on the opposite line near the passive corner of the triangle.

If you are being seen as a Swapper, Sharers will have placed you somewhere near the top of the triangle.

If the Sharer’s perception of you (where they have placed you on the assertiveness triangle) is causing difficulties, then it is a matter of making a conscious decision to travel up or down the various dimensions of the triangle, becoming more or less passive, more or less aggressive, (or, to put it another way, more or less committed, passionate, enthusiastic, driven etc.) as seems appropriate to the situation and the person you are dealing with.

**Summary**

The Transformational assertiveness approach is fluid and flexible and seeks to create win/win outcomes by directly tapping into and effectively using the emotions and behaviours inherent in the everyday situations we encounter.

Traditional assertiveness approaches seek to create win/win outcomes through the use of professionally packaged tools and techniques that distance us from the emotions and behaviours inherent in the situations we encounter. These techniques are very worthwhile as starting points but can lack the power and/or credibility to create win/win outcomes when confronted with real life situations.

To use transformational assertiveness effectively we need first to recognise how others prefer to interact with us. We can then choose the most appropriate type of assertive response.
There are four main ways in which people can interact with us:

**As Takers** - an aggressive approach where the Taker wins and you lose

**As Givers** - a passive approach where the Giver loses and you win

**As Swappers** - an assertive approach where the Swapper seeks win/win outcomes through the use of balanced, objective, logical approaches

**As Sharers** - an assertive approach where the Sharer seeks win/win outcomes by directly tapping into and effectively using the emotions and behaviours inherent in a situation.

Each of the above types of interaction are best addressed by the following types of assertive response:

Takers are best responded to by an assertive/aggressive style of transformational assertiveness

Givers are best responded to by an assertive/passive style of transformational assertiveness

Swappers are best responded to by both traditional assertiveness and assertive/aggressive transformational assertiveness, depending on the needs and context of the situation.

Sharers are best responded to by a number of assertiveness styles depending on the situation and the context. Clues as to the best style to adopt can be gleaned from observing the Sharer’s behaviour towards you, as this gives strong clues as to how they perceive your interaction with them (whether they see you as a Taker, Giver, Swapper etc.).

**Reference:** Charles Lines (2007), Transformational assertiveness: what it is and how to use it, [http://www.tallistraining.co.uk/assertiveness_article.htm](http://www.tallistraining.co.uk/assertiveness_article.htm) (accessed 13/12/2007)