

Lesson Plan: Assertiveness

Being assertive is an essential life skill to have when managing people, whether you manage a team or work within a project team, knowing when to stand your ground and equally when to concede is crucial to business situations. This lesson plan from *In Company 3.0* Intermediate level looks at the dos and don'ts of being assertive, and students do a reading task to get the cultural perspective, before looking at assertiveness via different communication styles. Download and circulate the accompanying [Student's Book pages](#) and use the related [audio files](#) for the listening section.

Level: Intermediate B1+

Time: approx 60 minutes or longer depending on how the activities are used

How to use this lesson plan:

The lesson can be used for the whole class, who can work in pairs. Download and print out the Student's Book pages so each student has a copy and download the audio files.

Learning objectives

This unit is about how to be assertive. It begins by asking students to discuss why some people always seem to get their own way and others seem to get walked over. They read and discuss an article about the link between assertiveness and culture, and then match character traits to four basic communication styles. After discussing the pros and cons of each communication style, they listen to and analyze three different versions of the same conversation. They used what they have learned to make lists of dos and don'ts, and finally, they work with a partner to practise being assertive in different situations.

This first section explores the idea of assertiveness by looking at a range of office situations where people might be ignored or taken advantage of by their colleagues.

Warm-up

Focus attention on the title and ask students what they understand by the word **assertiveness**. Ask them to suggest business situations where assertiveness is important and if there are any where they think it is better to let other people have their own way.

1 Focus attention on the cartoon and ask why the man has footprints all over him (someone has walked on him). Elicit or explain the meaning of the two idioms *to get walked all over* (to have other people ignore or discount your opinions and do what they want to do) and *to get your own way* (to have other people allow you to do and have what you want). Ask who they think the other man is and what the situation is (possibly a psychiatrist with the man lying on the psychiatrist's couch seeking help for his lack of assertiveness; perhaps even the psychiatrist has walked all over the man in order to get to his chair).

2 Ask students to work individually to complete the situations with the correct prepositions. Check answers with the class, then ask students to work with a partner to discuss whether they have ever been in similar situations and how they reacted. Encourage them to report back to the class. Be aware that some students may be reluctant to describe situations where they might appear to be weak. Be sensitive if they are reluctant to talk about their own experiences.

ANSWERS

a down; on b Under; down c in; in d on; off

3 Give students time to read the article, and then have a class discussion of what the author says about assertiveness and culture.

SUGGESTED ANSWER

The author says that both corporate and national cultures can affect how assertive employees feel they can be. But the two cultures can also be different, especially in multinational companies, where the corporate culture often reflects the cultural attitudes of the parent company rather than those of the country where the offices and plants are located.

4 Ask students to work individually to complete the diagram, then discuss it as a class. Answers will be very subjective and dependent on both the culture the students themselves come from and those they have come into contact with. Note that the answers at the end of these teacher's notes are simply where Hofstede places these countries.

ANSWERS

Austria (11) New Zealand (22) Germany (35) USA (40) Argentina (49) Japan (54) France (68) UAE (80) Malaysia (104)

5 Focus attention on the four communication styles represented by the photos on page 123. Make sure students understand the names given to the styles and ask them to match the character traits to them.

ANSWERS

is open and honest 4 stands firm 4 uses sarcasm 1 avoids conflict at all costs 2 gives in too easily 2 hides their true feelings 2 uses emotional blackmail 3 plays the victim 3 disregards your feelings 1 loses their cool 1 pulls rank 1 tries to get you on their side 3 keeps their cool 4 is respectful 4 shows empathy 4

6 Have a class discussion of this and see if students feel that their own natural communication style changes when they speak English.

ANSWERS

The Bulldozer

Pros: You may get what you want from more passive communicators in the short-term.

Cons: You'll get into a lot of fights with other aggressive communicators; very few people will want to deal with you in the future as you'll get a reputation for being selfish and inflexible.

The Doormat

Pros: If it's a quiet life you want, you'll avoid quite a lot of conflict at work this way.

Cons: You'll be pushed around and overloaded with work, which may create conflict at home; you'll never be a leader if you can't stand up for yourself.

The Prima Donna

Pros: Depending on how good you are at being manipulative, you may get your own way for a while.

Cons: If other people think they are being manipulated, they will begin to feel used and this may cause them to become aggressive; once you have a reputation as a prima donna, your emotional outbursts and flattery will never work again.

The Rock

Pros: You will generally get what you want without damaging your relationship with those you work with; you'll get a reputation for being strong but reasonable – just the sort of person to get promoted!

Cons: There are no real cons as long as you never let your assertiveness degenerate into aggression in difficult conversations.

7 (Tracks 2.55–2.57) Go through the instructions and the questions with the class, so that students have some idea of what information they need to listen out for. Be prepared to pause the recording and repeat each conversation several times to allow the students to analyze what they hear and answer the questions. You may also need to repeat them all together so that students can compare them.

ANSWERS

Version 1

- a Carmen is rather aggressive and bulldozes through Lars's weak objections. Lars is fairly passive throughout their conversation. He does try to make his excuses, but is mostly ineffectual.
- b At first, Carmen doesn't really listen to Lars at all. When she finally realizes he has a social engagement, she's unsympathetic and ridicules the local custom of eating dinner earlier than she's used to. Culturally, she doesn't seem to be very sensitive!
- c The apologies and the constant *but*s make Lars sound too defensive. He's the one doing Carmen a favour. He shouldn't need to defend himself.
- d Carmen doesn't seem to see the favour she's asking for as a favour at all. She sees it more as an obligation. This is reflected in the language she uses: 'You should put your job before partying with your friends', 'You have to help me with this presentation'. The effect is quite threatening. It works this time because Lars is behaving so passively. But it wouldn't be surprising if he eventually starts looking for another job!

Version 2

- a This time Carmen's style is mostly manipulative. Her strategy seems to be to present herself as the overworked victim, whom only Lars can help. For his part, Lars is much too aggressive in his response to her – at times almost insubordinate!
- b Carmen doesn't directly bully Lars, but she does use a combination of flattery (telling him he's the best in the office) and blackmail (suggesting that he might be replaced at the Rio conference by a junior member of staff with a better attitude).
- c Sarcasm is rarely an effective tactic in a conversation as it makes the other person look stupid – not a great idea when the other person is the boss! Sweeping generalizations ('You're always doing this to me', 'Why don't you ever give me any notice?') are also ineffective as it's easy to contradict them by giving an example of when the thing you're being accused of didn't happen. To be assertive you need to be specific not vague.

- d Considering all the emotions flying around, the outcome of the conversation is at least partly successful. But it's really just a compromise where neither person gets exactly what they want. And how likely is it that Carmen's presentation will be finished in an hour?

Version 3

- a This time both Carmen and Lars are assertive. Both stand their ground, but there's no bullying or emotional blackmail, no sarcasm or sweeping generalizations. And both clearly express how they feel.
- b Both speakers use expressions to show they are listening and understand the other's position: 'I realize it's rather short notice', 'Normally, I'd be happy to help out', 'I appreciate that you've got plans', 'I understand that, yes', 'It sounds like you have a busy evening ahead', 'I understand this is very inconvenient for you'. This keeps the tone neutral and avoids self-justifications.
- c Both techniques work well. Clearly stating how you feel using *I*-statements is very effective because how you feel can't be questioned. Only facts can be questioned. If I say 'You're pressuring me', you can say 'No, I'm not!' But if I say 'I feel like you're pressuring me', you can only say 'Well, that's not my intention'. Repeating your assertion ('I can't this evening') if said non-aggressively and without apology is also difficult to argue against. Some people call this technique the 'Broken Record' because you keep saying the same thing.
- d The conversation ends quite well. Lars doesn't give in to pressure and ruin his social plans, but he does offer to help Carmen in three other ways – by asking Joanna to assist her instead, by looking at some of her slides before going to bed and by coming in early in the morning to start work on her presentation. Carmen closes by validating their working relationship – 'I'm glad we managed to sort this out' – and saying she hopes he enjoys his party. She hasn't got exactly what she wanted, but things might even work out better this way overall.

Track 2.55 audio script

- A:** Oh, Lars, there you are! Do you have a minute?
B: Er, sure. Please
A: Only, I need you to work a little late tonight. I have to get this presentation finished and I need you to help me with some of the slides. Shouldn't take more than a couple of hours. Three at the most.
B: Oh, I, er ...
A: Problem?
B: Er, no. It's just that I was planning ...
A: Great. Well, I'll show you what I've done so far. I've indicated where I need you to drop in some graphics ...
B: Actually, Carmen, sorry, but would it be okay if we did this tomorrow instead?
A: What? But I need it for tomorrow afternoon! I don't want to leave everything till the last minute!
B: It's kind of 'last minute' already!
A: What's that?
B: Oh, nothing. But, erm, the thing is, I'd invited a few friends over this evening – sort of a house-warming party for my new flat, you know. They're coming at seven, and I have to prepare the food and everything.

A: At seven! You eat so early in this country! Well, look, Lars, don't you think you should put your job before partying with your friends? You know how it is here. We work to a tight schedule. And it's not like you aren't getting paid overtime for this. Call your friends and tell them to come later. Right now, you have to help me with this presentation! Okay?

B: Erm, yes, I know, but, look, sorry, but some of my friends have kids. And it's a workday tomorrow. They can't really stay that late ...

A: Lars, hold it right there! Look, I told you when you took this job there'd be a lot of extra work. You said you could handle that. So handle it! Now, come on! I have to get this done by eight. I've got plans myself.

B: But ...

A: No buts, Lars. Now, call your friends and let's get on.

B: Okay, Carmen. Anything you say.

Track 2.56 audio script

Version 2

A: Oh, hi Lars. Listen, could I ask you a favour?

B: Uh-oh, I don't like the sound of this! Let me guess. You want me to work late again?

A: Would you? The thing is, I have this presentation to finish for tomorrow and I need someone who's good at producing graphics to help me out with some of the slides. Frankly, you're so much better at this than anyone else in the office, I'd really like it to be you. It shouldn't take more than two or three hours. What do you say? Will you do it?

B: Look, Carmen, you're always doing this to me!

A: Always doing what?

B: Dumping extra work on me at the last minute! Why don't you ever give me any notice when you want me to do overtime?

A: Lars, I do usually give you notice. But this presentation just came up. I'm covering for someone who's away on sick leave. And I really need your help.

B: Oh, well, that's different then! No problem!

A: So you'll do it?

B: No, Carmen, I can't. I've got some people coming round this evening. It's my house-warming party, as a matter of fact.

A: Oh, really? And you didn't invite me?

B: You mean you would have come?

A: Of course not. I'm far too busy, Lars – battling on here on my own! It would have been nice to be invited, though.

B: Okay, you're invited!

A: Sorry, I can't come. I've got this presentation to get ready. And now my top team member's decided to put his social life first, it's going to take all night!

B: Look ...

A: Oh, don't worry about it, Lars. I'll ask Joanna instead.

B: The new kid?

A: The new kid, yes. She's very competent, actually. And very keen to help out. The way you used to be, Lars! In fact, I'm thinking of sending her to the Rio conference with Angelique.

B: Hey, I thought I was supposed to be going to Rio with Angelique!

A: Well, that was before you lost your can-do attitude, Lars. I need someone in Rio who'll be an asset not a liability!

B: Okay, okay. I'll give you an hour, all right? Let's see how much of your presentation we can get done by seven. Then I have to go!

A: Thanks a million, Lars! I owe you one!

Track 2.57 audio script

Version 3

A: Ah, Lars. Can you spare me a moment? I've got a favour to ask you.

B: Sure.

A: It's about this presentation I have to get ready for tomorrow's meeting.

B: Oh, yes?

A: Yes, I realize it's rather short notice, but could you possibly stay on for a couple of hours to help me out with some of the slides? I'd really appreciate it. It's just the graphics I need help with, actually, I've got the rest of it pretty much covered.

B: Ah, now that could be a bit difficult, Carmen. You see I have some friends coming round this evening.

A: Oh, really?

B: Yes, it's my house-warming party, actually. Got a few friends coming over to celebrate, you know. Normally, I'd be happy to help out, but tonight I can't.

A: Of course, your new flat! I forgot. Congratulations!

B: Thanks. It's nice to have my own place at last!

A: Of course. Well, now, I appreciate that you've got plans. And I didn't know until today I was even doing this presentation. But there we are. So Lars, I'd really like you to help me out – even if it's just for an hour. You know how important this presentation is.

B: I understand that, yes. But I have these guests coming at seven. Before that I have to cook and get things ready. So you see I just can't help you this evening.

A: It sounds like you have a busy evening ahead! Okay, I understand this is very inconvenient for you. I'm not happy about it myself, to be honest. It's my evening gone too. And I would prefer it if you were able to help me out. You're a lot better at designing graphics than I am, so that would save a lot of time.

B: I really can't help you this evening, Carmen. It would be unfair to cancel my party now at the last minute with some of my guests probably already on their way over.

A: This is a problem, isn't it? Naturally, I'm disappointed that you can't at least postpone your party for an hour or two. I don't often ask you to do overtime. And I'd really like your input on this slideshow.

B: I could look at it first thing in the morning if that's any help. But tonight I can't.

A: Okay, Lars, well, I'd better find someone else to give me a hand this time, then. Maybe Joanna can spare me some time.

B: Yes, Joanna's really good with graphics. I'll ask her if you like. And, look, my party shouldn't go on too late. A lot of my guests have kids and it's a workday tomorrow. If you email some of the data over to me, I'll take a look at it before I go to bed. Then we should be able to finish it off really quickly in the morning. How about that?

A: Yes, that would certainly be some help. I'll do that.

B: And I guess we could both come in half an hour early in the morning to give ourselves a bit more time.

A: Good idea. Thanks, Lars. I'm glad we managed to sort this out. Enjoy your party! See you in the morning.

8 Give students time to decide which items should go in the dos and don'ts lists. Check answers with the class.

ANSWERS

a Don't **b** Do **c** Do **d** Don't **e** Don't **f** Do **g** Do **h** Do **i** Don't **j** Do **k** Do **l** Do

9 Allow plenty of time for this activity. Ask students to work with a partner and turn to their respective pages. They each have a different role in the same three situations. They may need time outside of class to prepare what they are going to say. When they hold their meetings, go around giving help and encouragement.

1:1 notes

Without taking on the role of a doormat yourself, allow your student to experience some success in the course of these roleplays! Your superior command of English would make it very easy to win each argument, so be sensitive to the fact that your student is not only struggling with the skill of being assertive, but

also with the language. Respond positively to successful moves they make to exhibit assertive but non-aggressive behaviour. On the other hand, make sure that there is sufficient challenge for them to feel that they have earned their success.



Unit 20, Exercise 4 answers for self-checking

20 Assertiveness (p122, ex4)



Unit 20, Exercise 9

Photocopy and cut out the Exercise 9 activity material for Student A and Student B in each pair.



Exercise 9 activity for Student A

Situation 1

You need to hold a one-hour emergency meeting with your team this afternoon (you decide why), but forgot to book the meeting room. When you go to book it at the last minute, you see that Speaker B has it block-booked for the whole afternoon – again! Go and see them in their office to see if they'll free up an hour for you. You start the conversation by knocking on their door and saying: Hi, have you got a minute?

Situation 2

You run the Frankfurt office of your company. Your assistant Yvette has been on secondment to the Shanghai office for the past two months. It was your idea that she gain experience overseas, but in her absence your workload has increased (you

decide in what way) and, frankly, you are now finding it difficult to cope. Fortunately, Yvette is due back next week, so things should get a bit easier. Now the phone's ringing – it had better not be more work!

Situation 3

You work in the marketing department. When you joined your company four months ago, your boss, Speaker B, gave you the long-term goal of exploring the possibilities of social media. This is an area your company currently does not exploit very well. But, although you've had a few initial ideas (you decide what), your schedule has been so hectic you've had little time to get very far. When you see your boss at the water cooler, you decide to raise the issue.



Exercise 9 activity for Student B

Situation 1

You have the meeting room booked for the whole of this afternoon so you can hold your monthly update meeting with the rest of your team (you decide what you have to discuss). Last time you held the meeting, you found 90 minutes was not long enough to cover everything, so you've scheduled it from two till five this time. First, find out who's knocking on your door.

Situation 2

You run the Shanghai office of your company. For the past two months, you have had an assistant, Yvette, on secondment from the Frankfurt office helping you out. It was her boss's idea that she transferred and, to be honest, it took rather a lot of time to train her, but she's proved to be very creative and efficient.

She's due to return to Germany next week, but you really need her to stay on for another four or five weeks to complete an important project (you decide what). Phone the Frankfurt office and see if her boss can spare her for a little longer.

Situation 3

You run the marketing department of your company. When Speaker A joined your department four months ago, you gave them the long-term goal of exploring the

possibilities of social media. This is an area your company currently does not exploit very well. You're rather sceptical about social marketing (you decide why), but your boss is very keen and now wants a progress report on his desk in two weeks' time! When you see Speaker A at the water cooler, you decide to find out what progress they're making.