

# HELPS

Health Enhancement for Lifelong Professional Students

## Assertiveness: Why It Matters and How it Will Help You Lead

Graduate and professional students have to jump through a lot of hoops to attain their goals. Developing assertive communication skills can help you clear more hoops and hurdles with ease, and help you stand out as a confident, dependable leader. Assertiveness is not only a skill worth developing well, it's expected of you at this level.

Assertive communication is important during school and after graduation, says Carol Stewart, Ph.D., adjunct professor of management at Southern Connecticut State University. "It helps you build credibility, demonstrate accountability, and show others that you are focused on the project or assignment and are invested in the outcome. In the

### *"I Learned Assertiveness the Hard Way"*

Lorneth Fahie-Peters, now an academic counselor at Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, TN tells students they should practice assertiveness skills and learn when to be assertive. "One of those situations is when they meet their advisor for the first time. Students should be prepared to talk about their reasons for choosing a major and how the advisor can assist them in achieving their goals. This kind of assertiveness can guarantee a student great direction from their advisor. Advisors like to know that the students they assist know what they want."

When Fahie-Peters was a graduate student in 2005, she says she learned that assertiveness is the key to a student's success. "Working with professors, peers and bosses with different personalities can become somewhat overwhelming to a graduate student," she notes. "Coming from my background of always respecting my elders, I did not know how to be assertive without being considered rude. I learned the hard way."

Three weeks before graduation, Fahie-Peters' faculty advisor was still working on the final edits for her thesis. Frustrated, but not wanting to appear disrespectful, she waited and waited until one week before graduation. "I finally contacted her by e-mail and phone and was blunt about what I needed done to graduate with my Master's degree, in less than a week," she explains. "I then approached the dean of the college with my situation. This was all resolved about two days before I graduated. If I had been more assertive and told my faculty advisor exactly what was needed, along with my deadlines to have the thesis done, I think that things would have turned out differently."

workplace, employees who demonstrate that they can be relied upon to do a task or research all perspectives when pitching an idea are respected, are given important or sensitive projects, and are promoted."

### Three Key Factors

Donna Thomas-Rodgers, Ed.D. is a professional speaker, author and coach based in Birmingham, Ala. Over the last 20 years, she has developed three key factors to being assertive:

- Assertion means that you exude confidence.
- Assertion translates into follow-through and follow-up.
- Assertion requires strength to lead by example and stand firm in your position. "Students need to understand and demonstrate each of these," Thomas-Rodgers emphasizes. "After they attain that advanced degree, others will be looking to them for their expertise. If graduates haven't honed their skills, or don't see themselves as leaders or experts, they can't expect to stand out in a group or a crowd."

### Assertive vs. Aggressive

Knowing the difference between assertion and aggression can make you a more effective communicator. "Yet most grad students are focused on finishing school, and assertion is a secondary or reactionary condition of their education," says Thomas-

Rogers. "In order to achieve success in school and career, being assertive has to be in the forefront."

"Assertive communication demonstrates your ability to be heard and promote the best course of action based on facts and your perception of the situation. If done well, it can build agreement in a team and accomplish goals quickly and efficiently," says Anne Browning, human resources expert and director of the Global MBA Program at Webster University's George Herbert Walker School of Business & Technology. "Assertive communicators use 'I' effectively, do not attack others and are not shy about sharing an opinion. They use statements that objectively portray the situation at hand."

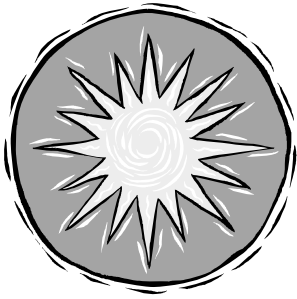
"Aggressive communication is similar in that it requires a confident, commanding style," says Browning, "but it hinges on an attack style that puts people on the defensive. It often includes personal attack words, blame, and generalized

*Continued on page 2*

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## *Assertiveness: Why it Matters*

*Continued from page 1*

terms—saying thing like, ‘you always mess up everything that you try to organize.’”

“Assertive communication is making comments, offering suggestions and pitching ideas that are thoroughly researched, presented objectively and without bias, with follow-up in a timely manner, adds Stewart.

“Aggressive communication has an ‘all about me’ flavor,” Stewart explains. “It may consist of comments that are not researched, or may be presented offensively or subjectively, with little regard to others’ time or schedule. An aggressive communicator may react with anger when his or her ideas are not well received.”

Assertiveness can help you make the best possible impression. Step over the line into aggressive communication and you’ll make a negative impression.

“A student who isn’t assertive enough is forgotten

and will not be as successful in class, group projects and career endeavors,” says Browning.

“How can I, as the instructor, give you credit for a great idea if you never present it? How can the team succeed if you don’t share an idea and have the confidence to stand behind it and influence? How can I rely on you as a manager if you can’t communicate problems with your team and resolve them successfully?”

On the other hand, Browning notes, “If you are aggressive instead of assertive, how can I take you seriously if you blame your teammates or point out problems with no factual basis? An aggressive stance may also damage relationships with students and faculty who might otherwise provide useful networking contacts.”

### **Speak Up**

“Assertive communication is an essential skill, especially

when working in teams, in which personal influence is needed to accomplish goals,” says Browning. “Those who speak up and who are confident in themselves are remembered and will be called upon as resources again and again.”

If you aren’t sure whether you are coming across as sufficiently assertive, ask for feedback. Stewart suggests opening the discussion by telling a professor or colleague, “I want to be perceived as credible/reliable/an expert. What do I need to do to accomplish that?” Then, when you have addressed those issues, return to the professor or colleague and say “I did what you suggested - is there more I can do?”

With practice, graduate and professional students can learn to make their voices heard in effective ways as they work with professors, peers, undergraduates and bosses.

## Resources

Toastmasters International [www.toastmasters.org](http://www.toastmasters.org)

Assertiveness Techniques (article by Linnda Durré, Ph.D.) [www.exchangemagazine.com/morningpost/2009/week51/Wednesday/121609.htm](http://www.exchangemagazine.com/morningpost/2009/week51/Wednesday/121609.htm)

The Power Starters: Realistic Leadership, Donna Thomas-Rodgers, Ed.D., founder [www.thepowerstarters.com](http://www.thepowerstarters.com)

*Your Perfect Right: A Guide to Assertive Living* by Robert E. Alberti, Michael L. Emmon, 1995

*When I Say No I Feel Guilty* by Manuel J. Smith, 1985

## *Save Money & Time With Easy, Fix-at-Home Meals*

It’s expensive to eat out, but who has time to cook? You can find practical advice, recipes and nutrition tips on these sites.

- Easy and inexpensive recipes for the busy college student from the Minnesota State University, Mankato: [www.mnsu.edu/shs/healtheducation/bmc](http://www.mnsu.edu/shs/healtheducation/bmc)
- “Good Eats” by the University of New Hampshire Health Services: [www.unh.edu/health-services/good\\_eats/index.html](http://www.unh.edu/health-services/good_eats/index.html)
- 7 Nights Of Easy Food Recipes For Hungry, Busy College Students And Other Non-Cooks <http://lifearoundyou.com/easy-food-recipes.html>
- 8 Quick, Easy, and Cheap Food Ideas and Recipes for College Students <http://hubpages.com/hub/8-Quick-Easy-Food-Ideas>
- University of South Florida offers nutrition podcasts and healthy eating tips [www.campUSDish.com/en-US/CSS/UnivSouthFlorida/FreshHealthy](http://www.campUSDish.com/en-US/CSS/UnivSouthFlorida/FreshHealthy)