

Communicating Assertively & Setting Boundaries

Leaders build clarity, confidence and respectful communication.

MARGARET COLLINS
CONFIDENCE | CLARITY | COURAGE
VISIT MARGARETCOLLINS.COM

Using the

Assertiveness and Boundaries

Workbook

Assertiveness is about being clear and respectful.

When you communicate assertively, you express your needs & boundaries while respecting the needs of others.

This lesson connects naturally with what you've already explored in delegation and managing requests - it's about how you say what you mean.

We'll explore:

- What assertive communication is (and is not).
- How to say "no" positively and set boundaries.
- How to ask clearly for what you need.
- How to balance clarity with kindness and respect.

These are my reflections

.....

on ___ /___ /_____

What Is Assertiveness?

Assertiveness is behaviour that shows self-respect and respect for others. At its simplest, assertiveness says:
"This is OK by me - that is not OK."

It sits midway between two less-helpful extremes:

Passive	Assertive	Aggressive
Avoids conflict, apologises, over-accommodates.	States needs clearly, calmly, confidently.	Demands, blames or dismisses others.

Why Assertiveness Matters in Leadership

Leadership requires influence — and influence depends on clear, congruent communication.

Assertive leaders don't seek power over; they seek clarity with others. They create trust by being honest, reliable and fair.

Assertive communication helps you:

- Express your opinions or boundaries without guilt.
- Handle requests or expectations respectfully.
- Reduce stress caused by overcommitment.
- Build credibility and trust with colleagues.

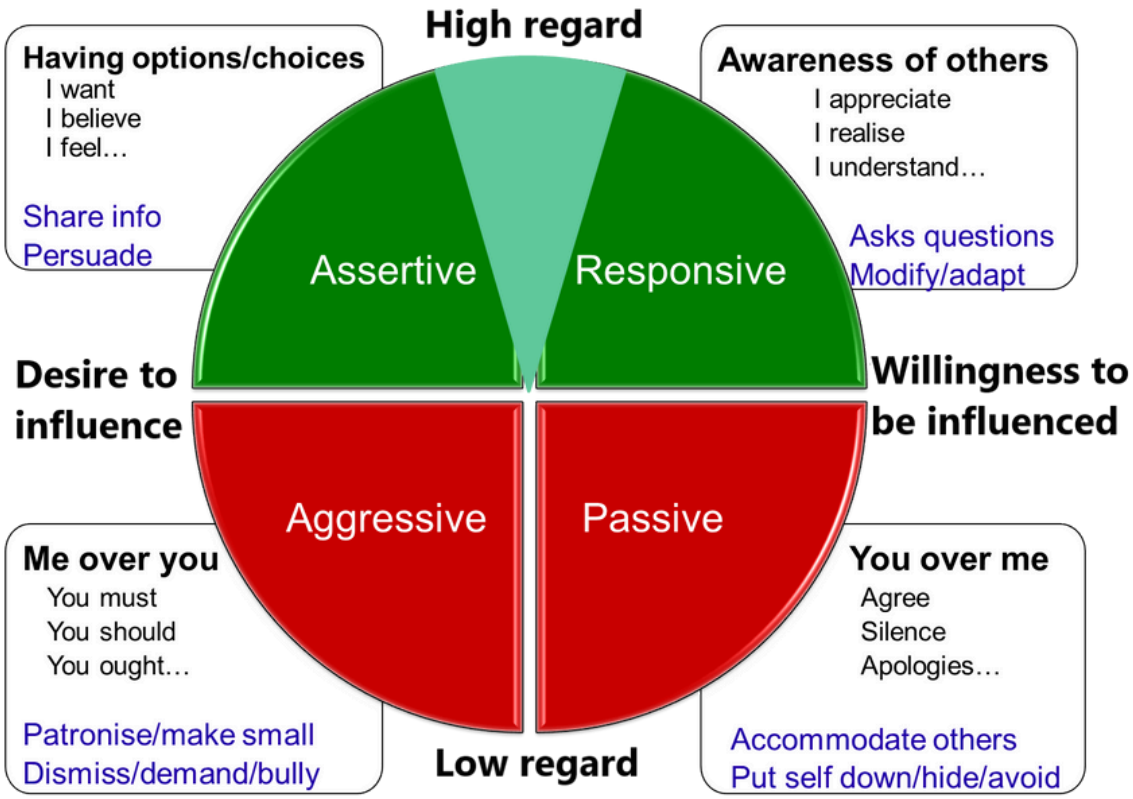


Dr Margaret Collins: info@MargaretCollins.com © 2025 All rights reserved Do not redistribute

The Assertive Spectrum

This helpful model for the spectrum of communication can guide your responses. Listen out for the "give away" phrases or use of language:

- Assertive: "I want / I believe / I feel…" →
  Share information and persuade with respect.
- Responsive: "I appreciate / I understand / I realise…" →
  Show awareness of others and adapt.
- Aggressive: "You must / You should / You ought…" →
  Demand, dismiss or dominate.
- Passive: "I'm sorry / It doesn't matter / Whatever you think…" →
  Withdraw or accommodate excessively.



Healthy communication styles balance the desire to influence others with the willingness to be influenced in any given situation.

The Assertive Spectrum

Think of a situation where communication felt uncomfortable or unbalanced and consider:



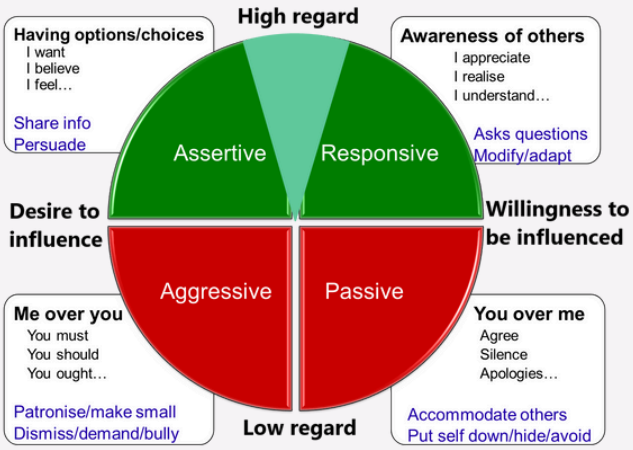
Reflections:

Were you more assertive, responsive, passive or aggressive?

What effect did this have on the outcome of the conversation?

How did you feel during and after that conversation?

What would a more assertive or responsive version of that conversation change?



Five Essentials of Assertive Conversations

Before you begin, apply these five conditions. Is this...

The right person: Often the thought of an assertive conversation is stressful so we try to avoid it or choose to discuss the subject with the wrong person. You need to be clear, is this the right person? Can this person make the changes you want?

The right place: Sometimes the best place is right here, especially if you feel an inappropriate comment or request has been made. Sometimes it can be more helpful to arrange for a private conversation later, maybe on neutral ground or to wait until you have more information or support.

The right time: Always consider whether both parties have the time they need for this conversation right now. If one of you is likely to feel pressured and unable to either invest due attention or have to rush off afterwards, this might not be the best time.

The right way: Often, assertive communication happens face to face. Sometimes a brief email might be helpful but remember that it is easy to misread or misinterpret the intentions of another in an email. Is it helpful to raise the issue and to suggest you both meet later so you have time to give consideration to the conversation and gather information?

The right thing: If we feel we have to gather our courage for this conversation it is easy to get side-tracked or to change the subject. We end up talking about how inconvenient the time of this meeting is rather than stating that we are unhappy that the other person volunteered us to go in the first place. It is really important to tackle to the right subject and to stay on track.

Dr Margaret Collins: info@MargaretCollins.com © 2025 All rights reserved Do not redistribute

How to be Assertive

Effective assertive conversations often have a similar structure. Following this pattern helps to keep you on track even if you become aware of emotional dynamics.

1: Listen and Evaluate – Understand what's being asked.
- Is your answer a definite yes, no or maybe?
- What's the real issue or need behind the request?

2: Show Understanding – Demonstrate genuine empathy.
- "I see why that's important."
- "I understand the urgency and appreciate the opportunity."

3: Say What You Want – Be direct and specific.
- Use I statements: "I'd like…", "I prefer…", "I need…"
- Avoid "should," "must," or long apologies.

4: If appropriate: Negotiate or Clarify Consequences
- Aim for a win-win outcome.
- "If we do this, then…" or "Would it work if…?"

Sometimes the conversation will set a boundary where negotiation is not possible. In most situations you will have the right to say no, respectfully.

When saying "No", it often helps to be brief.

Structure your "No" clearly and respectfully:

1: **Affirm**: "I see that's an important task."
2: **Explain** (briefly):
"Right now my focus is on finishing X."
3: **Decline**: "So I can't take that on right now."
4: **Bridge** or offer an alternative:
"Could we revisit this next month?" or
"Perhaps Sam could help."

Remember: "No" is a complete sentence.

Megan LeBoutillier

Dr Margaret Collins: info@MargaretCollins.com © 2025 All rights reserved Do not redistribute

Assertive Requests

Assertiveness also means asking clearly for what you need:

- "I'd like to discuss revising the project timeline — is now a good time?"
- "I'd appreciate if you could confirm your feedback by Wednesday."
- "Would it be possible to...?"

Avoid using minimising language like "I just think..." or "I'm no expert but..." which undermine your credibility.



What is it that you need to ask for?

Dr Margaret Collins: info@MargaretCollins.com © 2025 All rights reserved Do not redistribute

Setting Boundaries

Boundaries are not always walls; they can be guide rails.
They protect your time, energy or wellbeing so you can do your best work.

Sometimes a simple "No" is very effective:

- I'd like to help I just don't have capacity right now.
- Thank you for asking but I'm not able to commit to that right now.
- I'd like to help but that isn't going to be possible for me.
- I really appreciate being asked but no, I can't do that.
- I'm going to say no for now. If something changes, I'll get back to you.
- I understand what you're asking but that isn't a priority right now.
- No, I can't do that. What I can do is…

It can help to practice saying these out loud!

When you want to change a previously established behaviour or norm you may need a different structure:

1. **Acknowledge the past:** "In the past I've been happy to handle the admin…"
2. **Set the new boundary:** "I'm no longer able to do that."
3. **Build a bridge:** "What do we need to change to make sure it still gets done?"

Where might you need to set a new boundary?
In the past I've been happy to:
- work over the weekend
- organise the meeting
- help you with your analysis
- proofread the drafts
- plan and prep all the meals
- manage the kids' after-school routines
- keep the work area tidy…

Dr Margaret Collins: info@MargaretCollins.com © 2025 All rights reserved Do not redistribute

My Assertive Edge

Where do I find assertiveness most difficult?

- With senior colleagues or students?
- When saying no?
- When asking for support or feedback?

What one conversation would you like to handle more assertively this month?



Dr Margaret Collins: info@MargaretCollins.com © 2025 All rights reserved Do not redistribute

My Assertive Conversations?

Leadership often means navigating requests, expectations and emotions, sometimes from people senior to you, sometimes from students or collaborators who depend on you.

Assertive communication helps you handle these situations with integrity and confidence. The intention here is protecting time and energy for your priorities.

Below are three common academic scenarios. For each, reflect on what an assertive response would look and sound like for you.

Scenario 1: The Additional Request
You're finalising a grant application when a senior colleague asks you to review "just a quick draft" of their paper before tomorrow.

Passive response:
"Of course, I'll do my best to fit it in tonight."

Aggressive response:
"You always do this at the last minute! I don't have time."

Assertive response:
"I can see this is important and I'd like to help, but I have a deadline today. I could look at it later if that still helps."

Reflection:

- Can you recall a situation similar to this?
- What would your instinctive response be?
- What might you change?

Dr Margaret Collins: info@MargaretCollins.com © 2025 All rights reserved Do not redistribute

My Assertive Conversations?

Scenario 2: The Over-Eager Student

A PhD student frequently emails work for review late at night and expects immediate feedback.

Passive response:
Responding at midnight to “keep things moving.”

Aggressive response:
“Stop sending me messages after hours — it’s unprofessional.”

Assertive response:
“I value your enthusiasm. To give proper feedback, I’ll reply within two working days. Let’s agree on realistic turnaround times.”

Reflection:

- What boundary do you need to set to protect your focus and wellbeing?
- How can you communicate it clearly yet kindly?

Dr Margaret Collins: info@MargaretCollins.com © 2025 All rights reserved Do not redistribute

My Assertive Conversations?

Scenario 3: The Leadership Opportunity

You're invited to join a new university committee/working group.
You're already stretched but you know this could raise your visibility.

Passive response:
Saying yes immediately out of guilt or habit.

Aggressive response:
Dismissing the request as "a waste of time." or a distraction.

Assertive response:
"Thank you for thinking of me — I'm honoured to be considered.
Can I check what the expected time commitment is before confirming?"

Reflection:

- How do you normally decide which opportunities to accept or decline?
- What might an assertive "Yes" or "No" sound like in your voice?

Dr Margaret Collins: info@MargaretCollins.com © 2025 All rights reserved Do not redistribute

WANT MORE?



This workbook explores how to communicate assertively and set boundaries.

Leadership built on assertiveness is about clarity and trust. You help others understand what matters and where they stand.

Boundaries protect your energy so that your "yes" carries weight and your attention remains focused on what truly moves you, your team and your mission forward.

Assertive leaders create environments where expectations are transparent, collaboration feels safe and workloads are realistic.
They negotiate priorities without guilt, say no without apology, delegate without micromanaging.

I hope this content has been useful.
If you know you need more, do reach out to me. I'd love to hear from you.

You can always explore the other resources on my website.

MargaretCollins.com/

Resources

Let me know how you get on!

Margaret

Dr Margaret Collins: info@MargaretCollins.com © 2025 All rights reserved Do not redistribute