Passive, Aggressive, and Assertive Communication in the Workplace

Communication is the heartbeat of every relationship, especially at work. The way we express our needs, opinions, and boundaries can either build trust or create tension. This worksheet will help you reflect on three common communication styles: Passive, Aggressive, and Assertive. Remember, we all fluctuate between these styles—there's no shame, only learning.

Passive Communication

What it is: Avoiding the expression of thoughts, feelings, or needs, often to avoid conflict or please others.

How it might look:

- Saying "It's fine" when it's not
- Avoiding eye contact
- Apologizing often, even when unnecessary
- Prioritizing others' needs and neglecting your own
- Letting others make decisions for you
- Feeling resentful later
- Speaking quietly or not at all
- Little confidence or self-assurance

Passive communication often stems from fear of rejection or not wanting to burden others. You're not alone if this feels familiar.

Aggressive Communication

What it is: Expressing needs or opinions in a way that violates the rights of others, often through control, criticism, or dominance.

How it might look:

- Interrupting others
- Uses sarcasm, blame, criticism, or humiliation
- Speaking loudly or forcefully
- Dismissing other opinions
- Needing to "win" a conversation
- Refuses to compromise
- Disrespectful

Aggressiveness can be a shield for pain, fear, or past experiences of not being heard. It doesn't mean you're a bad person; it just means there's something deeper worth exploring.

Assertive Communication

What it is: Clearly and respectfully expressing your needs, boundaries, and opinions, while valuing the perspectives of others.

How it might look:

- Using "I" statements
- Maintaining calm, open body language
- Listening actively
- Saying no when needed, without guilt
- Asking for what you need without blame
- Collaborative and easily compromises
- Strong eye contact
- Self-assured and confident

Assertiveness is a skill; it takes practice and self-kindness. It's not about being perfect; it's about being honest and respectful, both to others and yourself.

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Scenarios at Work

Scenario 1

You're overwhelmed, and your manager gives you a new project.

Passive *"Okay, sure. I'll get to it." (even though you're already behind).*

Aggressive *"Are you kidding me? Don't you see how much I'm already doing?"*

Assertive *"I want to give this project the attention it deserves. Can we talk about my current workload and see what can be adjusted?"*

Scenario 2

A coworker consistently interrupts you in meetings.

Passive *Says nothing, shrinks back.*

Aggressive *"You always interrupt me. Maybe let someone else talk for once."*

Assertive *"I noticed I was interrupted a few times. I'd appreciate the chance to finish my thoughts."*

Scenario 3

You disagree with a team decision.

Passive *Goes along with it even if you have concerns.*

Aggressive *Pushes your opinion without listening to others.*

Assertive *"I have a different perspective I'd like to share. Would now be a good time to talk through it?"*

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Being a better communicator isn't about changing who you are; it's about honoring your voice and the voices of others. Be gentle with yourself as you grow. Every step toward healthier communication is a step toward more peace, connection, and confidence.

Reflective Questions

1. When do you tend to hold back your thoughts or feelings at work? Why?
2. How do you typically respond when someone disagrees with you?
3. Which communication style do you most often use at work?
4. How does that style serve you? How does it limit you?
5. What's one situation where you could practice being more assertive?
6. What would being kind and honest to yourself look like in your next conversation?
7. In what situations do you feel most confident communicating? What makes those feel different?
8. Think of a recent miscommunication; what role did your communication style play in it?
9. What would it look like to honor both your needs and someone else's in a tough conversation?
10. Who at work models assertive, respectful communication well? What can you learn from them?

Assertive Communication Starters

"I feel/need..."

"What I hear you saying is..."

"I'd like to understand more about your perspective."

"I want to be clear about how this is affecting me."

"Can we take a moment to revisit expectations?"

"I respect your opinion, and I see this differently."

"I'm setting this boundary because I value our working relationship."

"Let's come up with a plan that supports both of our goals."

"When [X] happens, I feel [Y]. What can we do differently?"

"I'd prefer we talk about this in person. When would be a good time?"