

BALANCED THINKING LEADS TO ASSERTIVENESS

by Dan Bobinski

If you look up "assertiveness" on a search engine, you're likely to get a bunch of pages that say "Stand up for yourself." "Stop being a door mat." "You have rights!"

Some folks can have tough time standing up for their own wants and needs so these phrases certainly have their place. But by themselves these phrases are misleading, because in practice, assertiveness is the result of a balanced way of thinking.

To focus only on our rights makes us **selfish and aggressive, not assertive**.

Some websites get it at least partially right by saying assertiveness is "being able to protect one's rights while protecting and respecting the rights of others." This definition is better, but I still think it misses the boat. If we respect the rights of someone to speak his mind but fail to consider his perspective, are we really listening? Are we really being an open-minded person?

A truly open-minded person is a win/win thinker. But thinking win/win is just that: Thinking. It's a mindset. It happens within our brain. We must choose it mentally. We have to focus our thoughts with a balance of two directions:

- a) Do we truly desire to understand the other person's point of view?
- b) Do we have a desire to speak up regarding our own point of view?

The first part means we're willing to mull over someone else's perspective and be big enough to change our mind if that perspective makes sense. It doesn't mean we have to agree. It's just that we're willing to change if the end result being suggested still meets our needs. Sadly, too many people equate "understanding" with "agreement." Perhaps the following illustration will help.

Let's say you have an airline ticket and you prefer window seats. As you board the plane, you notice a gentleman scooting into your window seat, which is 2A. You get the attention of the flight attendant, show her your ticket, and inform her that someone is sitting in your seat.

The following conversation ensues:

Flight Attendant: Excuse me, sir, what is your seat assignment?

Passenger: I'd like to sit here and talk with my friend. Can the person who has this seat swap seats with me?

Flight Attendant: What seat would that be, sir?

Passenger: 3B

In the next 2.2 seconds your mind races through the following logic:

1. The man wants to swap seats. You're fine with that - so long as the seat is a window seat.
2. You can see that 3B is an aisle seat.
3. You decide to go the extra mile, thinking maybe someone with a window seat could take 3B and you could have their window seat.
4. Getting someone to make that switch would take more than a few seconds, if anyone would be willing to switch at all.
5. People behind you want on the plane.
6. The flight attendants, the pilots, the ground crew and the airlines all want the plane to be on time.
7. Finding someone else to switch seats is not likely to be worth the hassle.
8. You very respectfully say "I think I'd just like to have my assigned seat."

This example illustrates true win/win thinking. You genuinely thought about how you could accommodate the other person's request, and you were willing to change if it made sense (that is, if you retained a window seat somewhere on the plane).

But it did not make sense to waste other people's time or give up what you wanted, so in the end you were assertive in keeping your original seat.

Some might say you weren't thinking win/win because the other person didn't get what he wanted. That common mistake occurs because people overlook the word "thinking."

In the example, you gave serious thought to the other person's desires. You even went beyond that to think about the desires of the crew and the other passengers. But the options set before you didn't make sense for anyone but the guy in your seat.

In other words, just because we think about and consider someone's position doesn't mean we have to agree. But that genuine consideration is fundamental to win/win thinking.

Bottom line: we can stand up only for our desires and be aggressive. Or we can always give in to someone else's position and be passive.

Or we can choose true assertiveness: A balance of standing up for our own desires along with a genuine understanding of the other person's point of view - and being willing to change if what we hear makes sense.

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