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Healthy Assertion: A Paradigm Shift

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"It is a mistake to look at someone who is self assertive and say, 'It's easy for her, she has good self-esteem.' One of the ways you build self-esteem is by being self-assertive when it is not easy to do so. There are always times when self-assertiveness requires courage, no matter how high your self-esteem." — Nathaniel Branden

Sometimes we understand the leader we want to be. We know the characteristics we want to embody. We can even visualize the impact we want to have on others. And yet, that way of leadership seems so separate and far from the experience we have of ourselves. For me, that process is a little like asking me to become left-handed when my dominant hand is right. Uncomfortable and awkward we embark on the journey of transforming our leadership and predictably we merely correct our existing ways rather than transform them at all.

According to Meriam Webster, to be **assertive** means, "disposed to or characterized by bold or confident statements and behavior." It seems simple enough and yet what is confident behavior for one may occur as aggressive for another. Healthy assertion requires communication, openness, honesty all delivered with appropriateness and flexibility. There is a lack of attachment to being right displayed by the relaxed, assertive leader. Leaders who assert themselves are confident and expressive, those they lead know where they stand and are more likely to respect the leader.

Nonassertive or **passive** leaders are perceived as pushovers, weak and uncertain. Those they lead have little respect and/or confidence in them and may experience frustration and/or anger with their leadership. Nonassertive leaders often have non structured ways of leading that creates confusion and ambivalence for those they lead.

As with all behavior, we are influenced by the ways we are raised and the models of assertion we have witnessed. What in

fact might *feel like* aggressive behavior may in fact be healthy assertion, this revelation alone can cause a paradigm shift. **Aggressive** behavior attacks people, cuts people down, can be perceived as humiliating and usually comes from defensiveness and low self-esteem.

As you give yourself the gift of practice it is important to remember that leaders often abandon practicing new behaviours and leadership approaches when they encounter adverse reactions from those they lead. In other words, you might be exhibiting healthy assertion and others may still react adversely. Here are some examples of *reactions* to healthy assertion and ways of addressing it when it happens.

Adverse Reactions to Healthy Assertion:

Complaining: “Someone thinks they know it all.” The best reaction to this is to simply ignore it. The complaining is nothing to do with you and best side stepped.

Aggression: Verbal or physical hostility is more a reflection on the individual engaging in the hostility than you. Hold your ground calmly and do not engage in any retaliatory behavior.

Self Pity: Excuses and crying, and any expression of victimization are all tactics that reflect poorly on the individual you are addressing and not necessarily anything to do with you. Stand your ground with compassion.

Well Being Excuses: Sometimes, individuals may repeatedly thwart healthy assertion by making claims about their well being. “I’m too sick to talk about this.” It is important to acknowledge the claim while maintaining consistency. “Thanks for letting me know, once you’re feeling better, please note that those files are required to be back in their bin by 5pm every evening.”

Constant Apology or Hyper-Sensitive: “I’m sorry, really sorry, I seem to do it that way a lot. I’ll try not to do it again. So sorry.” With this behavior the individual creates a situation where you find it difficult to address anything with them. The

apologizing and/or hyper-sensitivity gets in the way of your ability to lead them. The apology and/or sensitivity becomes the distraction and a way to avoid addressing the thing that needs addressed. Point to the behavior so that the individual is aware of it and then restate the request and/or statement.

Lying &/Or Defensiveness: “I didn’t mean it that way.” “I didn’t do that.” Albeit tricky behavior to overcome, it goes a long way to simply state that you may be incorrect and that your request stands. It is important not to take a positional stance and to remain flexible and unattached here while standing your ground.

Passive aggressive behaviour is characterized by indirect resistance to the demands of others and an avoidance of direct confrontation, as in deliberate procrastination, pouting, or misplacing important materials, the silent treatment, hostility, making intentional mistakes and is usually demonstrated by individuals who have experienced similar treatment in their formative years and/or learned that healthy assertion was not safe. Using sarcastic humour is another way passive aggressive behaviour undermines healthy communication.

Micro aggression is yet another communication to watch out for characterized by everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership. This behaviour can be overt, covert or happen unwittingly. The more we explore how our actions and behaviours impact others, especially marginalized groups, the more responsible in communication we can become.

It is important to explore your communication style mindfully. Are you open and direct? Are you confident and calm when you speak? Once you’ve identified the way you communicate and become aware of your impact on others you then have access to change. Give yourself grace and space to practice until the new way of behaving and communicating has become a habit.

“Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent.” — Eleanor Roosevelt