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Step Up Your Work Game

If you're having trouble presenting your ideas to higher-ups, consider building your assertiveness skills. These nine strategies can help you make an impact, achieve your goals—maybe even get a well-deserved pay raise.

[Kevin Nourse, PhD \(solr/searchResults.aspx?author=Kevin+Nourse\)](#)

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Consider the contrasting cases of Susan and Yolanda.

Susan, a speech-language pathologist in a health care organization, feels frustrated. She prides herself on her commitment to her clients, yet struggles in her role and often second-guesses her decisions. She feels tentative about approaching senior administrators with ideas for improving the clinic's functioning. In meetings, she holds back instead of sharing her insights in critical conversations about treatment protocols. Susan works long hours—far more than the role defines—but gets little recognition and support. She carries this stress home and worries about her job. Despite loving her profession, Susan is exhausted.

Yolanda's situation is markedly different.

An educational audiologist in a school system, Yolanda feels engaged, energized and productive. Teachers and administrators often seek her professional opinions. Based on her knowledge of other

educational audiologists' successes, she has recommended improvements to her district's services to children who are deaf or hard of hearing and, with administrators' support, is leading a project to make these improvements. Although voicing her opinion is sometimes challenging, she doesn't hold back in meetings with other professionals and parents when she questions a treatment protocol. Yolanda received formal recognition from her supervisor and is up for a promotion.

These scenarios, drawn from the actual experiences of communication sciences and disorders professionals, highlight the role and importance of assertiveness skills and underscore their benefits to both job performance and self-efficacy. Assertiveness and the ability to advocate for one's ideas is a vital skill for SLPs and audiologists who seek more influence on their clients, organizations and professions. Cultivation and use of this skill is something that I and my colleague Alice Waagen, as leadership development experts, teach to CSD professionals in ASHA's Leadership Development program (<http://on.asha.org/ashaldp>)—a year-long effort to help participants advance their own and others' careers. Here are some insights into honing assertiveness skills in CSD, based on our experiences working with program participants over the past three years.

What is assertiveness?

Assertiveness includes several key components, leadership researchers suggest. One is expressing one's feelings and thoughts openly despite being challenged by others. Another is standing up for oneself without abusing others. While speaking one's truth to others takes a certain amount of courage and skill, doing so in the midst of disagreement or conflict calls forth a higher level of ability.

As a key leadership skill, assertive behavior draws on a number of related personality facets and capabilities. In the Leadership Development Program, we administer an emotional intelligence self-assessment to help participants better understand their strengths and weaknesses. This step is a precursor to creating an action plan for development. Our experience reveals that three key elements enable assertiveness:

- **Self-regard** is the ability to respect yourself, acknowledge your strengths and accept your weaknesses. LDP alumna Lindsay Zurawski, an SLP for the Palm Beach County School District in Florida, describes how the emotional intelligence self-assessment revealed her weakness in this area. Her lack of self-regard was linked to a belief that, "I'm young and haven't been doing this as long as some other people, so I should just keep my opinions to myself."
- **Emotional self-awareness and expression** is cognizance of your inner emotional states and the ability to communicate these emotions in a functional way. Such emotional awareness is a critical first step to demonstrating assertive behavior. In essence, internal emotional reactions are what motivate you to take action. Leaders I coach often dramatically improve their assertiveness when they sensitize themselves to their inner emotional states—because this awareness prompts them to speak their truth.
- **Empathy** is the ability to understand and appreciate how others feel, which is key to building strong, trusting relationships. Ideally, asserting yourself is not a one-way street. Rather, it happens in the context of a relationship. By using empathic skills, you deepen trust with the listener, improving the likelihood that he or she

will listen to your attempt to assert an opinion. Mary Beth Mytych, an SLP in the Penn-Delco School District in Pennsylvania, explains that, since participating in the LDP, she is “so much stronger at perspective-taking or empathy,” enabling her to better appreciate the perspectives of families or colleagues. Using empathy, she’s better able to collaboratively assert her ideas in a way that builds mutual understanding and trust, without feeling she has to become defensive.

These three building blocks enable people to assert themselves and their ideas. But what is it that has the opposite effect, squashing people’s assertiveness? To find out, we polled the newest ASHA leadership development cohort in April, asking participants to identify internal or external factors that prevent or diminish their ability to assert themselves and their ideas. Among the most common:

- 45 percent indicated that contextual factors, such as a lack of support by their managers or a resistant organizational culture, blocked them from asserting their ideas.
- 37 percent indicated that personal factors, such as low self-confidence, fear of conflict, or people-pleasing tendencies played a big role in limiting their ability to assert themselves.

As these results show, our behavior is a byproduct of the interaction between our own abilities and our environment. And when that interaction causes people to feel muzzled, misery can follow. Janet Brown, ASHA director of health care services, reports that “I talk to many SLPs who don’t feel comfortable being assertive at work because they fear it will lead to conflict, and yet at the same time they feel they are being taken advantage of.”

This internal struggle often leads people to get stuck. Ultimately, the decision to improve your assertiveness skills often boils down to a cost-benefit analysis: Do the benefits of asserting yourself exceed the costs of not advancing your ideas and feeling taken advantage of?

Get going

What are some actions you can take to boost your assertiveness?

1 Ask for feedback.

People we work with know us in ways that we may not be aware of. Consider asking trusted colleagues or your boss about your ability to assert your ideas. Lindsay Zurawski thought assertiveness was a strength for her until she dared ask a school administrator for confirmation. The official indicated that was not the case. This kind of feedback can be tough to hear, but is often the first step in gaining awareness that leads to big improvements.

2 Internalize and reinforce your sources of power.

Amazingly, it’s during times of doubt and stress that many people forget their power and brilliance. Periodically reflecting on a list of your achievements—particularly when you are facing a conversation

in which it is likely you will need to assert yourself—can be a very effective strategy. Further, social science research indicates that our nonverbal behavior not only affects others' attitudes toward us, but also has a strong impact on how we think of ourselves. Social psychologist Amy Cuddy explains this concept in a recent Ted Talk video (<http://on.asha.org/cuddy-ted>). She recommends that before an interaction that requires you to assert yourself, find a private location where you can assume a power pose for two minutes. Positioning our bodies this way stimulates a physiological process that helps us feel more powerful. Although this shift is temporary, it is often enough to start a conversation assertively and confidently.

3 Find and develop your professional passion and purpose.

Several SLPs and audiologists I interviewed note that their courage to assert ideas springs from a deep commitment to serving clients and families. Passion and purpose often galvanize us to speak up, despite our fear. One particularly effective feature of the LDP is its requirement that participants do a leadership project based on what they feel is a pressing CSD need. This passion gives them the energy to move their projects forward.

4 Read inspiring books.

One audiologist I interviewed mentioned Sheryl Sandberg's recent book "Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead" as a useful resource for women seeking to curb self-defeating behavior and assert themselves more. Sandberg describes her fascinating ascent to senior leadership roles in Google and Facebook and powerful lessons she learned on such topics as mentoring women and using positive thinking to achieve work/life balance. She also describes a phenomenon called "the impostor syndrome," in which women in the workplace feel they have less to contribute than men. I also recommend reading great books on assertiveness (see end of article) and discussing the practical application of the ideas presented. Ten years ago, I read a number of books on Eleanor Roosevelt, Martin Luther King Jr. and Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall for a doctoral course on transformational leadership—I still draw on these books when I lack confidence to assert my ideas.

5 Find a mentor or role model.

Social psychologists have long argued that mentors and role models play a significant role in changing how we think and act. Accordingly, a developmental strategy I often suggest is identifying and interviewing people who model the very behavior we want to develop. Many times, the best mentor may be from a different field or may have a very different personality from ours. For example, Mary Beth Mytych "sought out a person that I call my job coach ... he's an information technology professional in the corporate world who helps me formulate my next plan of action and to be proactive."

6 Practice your skills.

Michelle Kraskin, an audiology supervisor, recommends trying out your assertiveness skills with a

trusted guide. “I’m a big talker and sometimes I talk out scenarios,” she explains. “I would say to my boyfriend, ‘Just pretend to be this person.’” Because a major part of assertiveness is embodied in our language, we need to find our unique voice in communicating this way. When I coach senior leaders, I often invite them to practice being assertive with me in critical conversations.

7 Clarify your authority and link your ideas to strategic priorities.

In many cases, professionals do not assert themselves because they are unsure of the scope and authority they possess in their professional role. This ambiguity can cause leaders-to-be to doubt their self-efficacy and authority to make decisions. Remedy this situation by clarifying your decision-making authority with your manager and ensuring that you are aligned on critical priorities. In the LDP, we often suggest that participants link their projects to strategic priorities for their organizations, increasing the likelihood of a positive reception when they assert their project ideas to their organizations.

8 Get comfortable with managing conflict.

Many SLPs and audiologists do not assert themselves because of discomfort with conflict and overuse of empathetic skills. Conflict competence is a skill that can be developed and practiced, as outlined by Eckerd College researchers Craig Runde and Tim Flanagan in a book I often recommend, “Becoming a Conflict Competent Leader.” Having a mentor who is more skilled at navigating conflict can pay big dividends in your development.

9 Build your professional knowledge and networks.

Several SLPs and audiologists I spoke with shared how they bolstered their assertiveness through professional education and relationship-building. In the LDP, we break the class of 30 into learning teams of five. Tight bonds form among team members as they support one another in responding to daily demands and completing their leadership projects. Team members often continue to meet even after the LDP year.

Susan, the SLP introduced at the beginning of this article, struggles with the consequences of her inability to assert herself professionally. However, she holds the power to change her situation. By making the choice to improve her skills and applying these nine strategies she, too, can achieve the success and professional impact that her audiology counterpart Yolanda has realized.

Although there are a fortunate few who are wired to assert themselves powerfully and confidently, most of us, like Susan, must invest time and energy in developing this skill. And it’s worth doing because the payoff is major. As Zurawski put it, “My career growth has been the most positively and significantly impacted because of the ability to be assertive.”

For more on assertiveness, check out these titles:

“Exercising Influence: A Guide for Making Things Happen at Work, at Home, and in Your Community,” by B. Kim Barnes (Pfeiffer, 2007)

“Power: The Infinite Game,” by Michael Broom and Donald Klein (Sea Otter Press, 1999)

“Leadership Presence: Dramatic Techniques to Reach Out, Motivate and Inspire,” by Belle Linda Halpern and Kathy Lubar (Gotham, 2004)

“The Glass Elevator: A Guide to Leadership Presence for Women on the Rise,” by Ora Shtull (85 Broads, 1999)

Kevin Nourse, PhD, founder of Nourse Leadership Strategies, is an executive coach and organizational development consultant based in Washington, D.C., and Palm Springs, Calif. kevin@nourseleadership.com (<mailto:kevin@nourseleadership.com>).

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1 Comment

June 5, 2014

Dale Gregore

Great article

Thanks, Kevin for highlighting one of my LDP areas of focus! Now to get reading!

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