



Teaching Assertiveness through Role-Play and Broken-Record Techniques

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Abstract

A workplace that assures a congenial work culture and ethics is always welcoming. However, this ambiance does not form on its own. We have to create that ambiance. One way is to see that we work joyfully and professionally with our colleagues. If this is done, there is a possibility to avoid stress. If we can create this situation, it is obvious that the innate talent is presented in the work. The possibility of creating such ambiance becomes a reality, if only we adopt the assertive approach rather than aggressive approach. Assertiveness as a skill helps one to overcome the pushes made by colleagues and superiors. It is undoubtedly a handy tool especially for the students as they are about to get into the industry where there is a possibility that every person would like to push and influence the other in many ways to complete the job. The students on becoming employees in the industry should not be aggressive in their approach in undertaking various jobs but rather apply their negotiation skills and see that their tasks are completed successfully to the appreciation of their colleagues and their superiors. This is where they need some guidance on assertiveness as a skill. This paper presents a detailed account of some observations and research conducted in the Advanced English Communication Skills Lab while imparting insights into assertiveness as a skill for the III. B.Tech. students of Electronics and Communication Engineering at Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Technology, Hyderabad.

Key words: *Assertiveness, aggressiveness, stress, interpersonal skills, negotiation skills, work.*

Introduction / Understanding Assertiveness

People are mostly obsessed with ‘making a living’, to begin with. Once the living is made available, the next target is to somehow move on and acquire a better opportunity, or a better living, and or more wealth. All this is done in the pretext of living well. Here, the idea of living well is not wrong. But, the problem is there is no understanding of what is living well. Without this clarity, people are not only inviting troubles to themselves but also sharing the troubles generously to all the people with whom they are associated with. Under these circumstances, assertiveness becomes timely and handy.

In general, most of the time, people are counting the accomplishments and not the path adopted. In a way, it is not the job or the process of undertaking the job that is important but the accomplishment is vital. This will lead to many troubles not only for the person who is doing the job but also to all the people involved in the job. If the impact is positive, everyone would enjoy it and there won't be any questions and discussion. But, the situation is otherwise. The person who is doing the job is not only adopting the go-getter approach and insisting on all the people involved in it. This is one of the prime reasons for stress which in turn will lead to many other unpredictable health issues. Under these circumstances, it is very difficult to cope with the work. At this juncture, assertiveness shall be handy and resolve many issues leading to stress.

“Assertive people are not just born that way, they are made” (www.exploringyourmind.com). Assertiveness is an important skill that helps a person to respect one's own self and also to respect others. Only when a person with self-esteem takes up a job or undertakes a responsibility, will it be fulfilled without fear and with complete involvement and satisfaction. Here, the job undertaken should not only be inclusive and benefit to all those involved in the activity but the process with which the job is taken up also plays an important role. It is not just the accomplishment that gives joy and happiness but every moment of the work and the approach to accomplish the given job plays an enormous role to get the joy of working and eliminating the stress to undertake the job. This is where the people with assertiveness do not fall prey to the negative elements such as ‘stress’ and will be free from the problems that it breeds.

How is it different from aggressiveness?

According to Oxford Learner's Dictionaries the word ‘aggressiveness’ means “angry and threatening behaviour” and “behaviour that is determined and shows force in order to succeed” (www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com). Aggressiveness is a behavior that has a quality of anger and determination and is ready to attack other people. It also intends to harm others. Violence is just a manifestation of aggressiveness physically. At times, emotionally or impulsively people take up aggressiveness owing to the small thought of intent. But if one plans to harm others and take up aggressiveness then it can be categorized as instrumental or cognitive aggressiveness. The action of aggressiveness can be termed as aggression. It can be physical or non-physical.

According to the definition found in Oxford Learner's Dictionaries the word 'assertiveness' means "the quality of expressing opinions or desires in a strong and confident way, so that people take notice" (www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com). It is a behavior that has a quality of clarity, inclusiveness and determination. It was not meant to attack others but it helps to emphasize the approach and view on any given issue. Assertiveness is the outcome of clarity and vision. It intends to include people and the objective of the work undertaken. It helps everyone to work with involvement and focus on the process to accomplish the job assigned.

Objectives

To make people listen to the speaker and pay attention to what is said.

How to combat imposition of negative influence of people around / peer group on oneself?

To gain little more control over oneself and on life and its situations.

Subjects of study

A batch of 30 students pursuing III B. Tech. Electronics and Communication Engineering Branch are selected as samples of research. These students are from various socio, economic and cultural backgrounds as they come from different places of origin.

Methodology

1. Identifying the material
2. Extensive reading and reading loudly
3. Brief Introduction to the Play by faculty
4. Undertaking Role play
5. Identifying Assertive & Aggressive Statements
6. Advantages of Assertive Statements over Aggressive Statements
7. Importance of tone voice
8. Observations by the students

Identifying the material

Two different situations are identified to undertake the activities and teach assertiveness skills to students. This skill will be helpful to them to maintain good rapport with others. It will be a good tool for them to make use of in their final year and career when they take up their internship and Job.

A scene from the play 'Where There's a Will' published in *Collected Plays Vol.1* (CP Vol 1) written by Mahesh Dattani was identified as material to impart assertiveness as a skill. The scene reflects the imposition of thoughts and ideas of a father on his son. Whereas the son has his own ideas and approach to work. This made the need for assertiveness in our day-to-day life. Based on different life situations, how one should look at and approach the work accomplishes the job making use of assertiveness as skill.

Extensive Reading and reading loudly

Students are asked to undertake extensive reading followed by it reading loudly. Reading will help them understand the scene. When they read the dialogues of the scene loudly, they get to know the emotions of the characters and empathize with the characters.

Brief introduction to the Play by faculty

The faculty briefly introduced the overview of the play and the situation leading to the scene with the students. This sharing helped the students to understand the scene, attitudes of the characters and the emotions involved. The play reflects the time zone of around the 1980s where having a landline facility at home is considered a status symbol. Ajit is the son and Hasmukh is the father in the play '*Where There's a Will*'. Hasmukh was a rich business man with a certain attitude and behavior. He followed the instructions of his father, toiled day and night and earned riches. He expects the same behavior from his son. Whereas, Ajit unlike his father wants to take up smart work rather than hard work. According to him, he has clarity on what to do and how to do it. His thoughts and ideas are totally in disagreement with his father Hasmukh. This is where the difference of opinion with regard to life, objectives, the approach to work, definition of accomplishments and the list goes on and on. Neither Ajit nor Hasmukh wants to change their opinion. Hasmukh has fixed notions. He has developed an attitude that he is 'always right' because of his success and the riches he has earned. On the other hand, Ajit is a born millionaire. His clarity on the meaning of success, work, the approach to work and life is totally different from his father. This may be because of the change in situation, times in which ajit is living, and the richness of the family.

Undertaking the Role Play

The brief introduction of the play and the situation leading to the scene helped students internalize the scene. Students are guided to form a team of two to practice and undertake the role play with the help of handouts shared. Furthermore, they are suggested to reflect the tone of voice in the delivery of dialogues. This is done to make them involved in the character. The role play was conducted after a meticulous practice of dialogues along with infusion of emotions and gestures. This act of undertaking role play helped them empathize with the characters and also connect themselves with similar situations how a person tries to impose his ideas and thoughts on others and push others to follow. This has made the platform perfect to take up the discussion and teaching assertiveness as a skill. The extract of the scene is given below:

ROLE PLAY – An extract from the play
Where there's a will written by Mahesh Dattani

AJIT : Don't I have any rights at all?

HASMUKH: You have the right to listen to my advice and obey my orders.

AJIT: Thank you. You are so generous I could kiss your feet.

HASMUKH: There's no need to do that. Just polish my shoes every morning and I'll be happy.

AJIT: You will never be happy. Not until all of us dance to your tune. And I will never do that.

HASMUKH: Don't be so stubborn!

AJIT: You are stubborn too!

HASMUKH: I'm stubborn because I know I'm right. You're stubborn because you are a nincompoop!

AJIT: Why am I a nincompoop?

HASMUKH: I've told you a hundred times not to keep the phone engaged for so long when I'm expecting a business call. If it weren't for the phone calls I receive, there would not be a phone for you to make your calls. If you don't have enough sense to understand that, then you are a nincompoop!

AJIT: Oh, come on! I mean, you are blowing it all out of proportion. Why don't you just get another line?

HASMUKH: Oh! So that you can call Deepak on one line and Champak can call you on the other. No, no, no.

AJIT: Who is Champak? I don't know any Champak.

HASMUKH: That is not the point.

AJIT: That is just the point! Anything I do is wrong for you! Just because you are a self-made man and had a deprived childhood, you feel that I am having it too easy. Nothing I do will ever seem intelligent to you. You are prejudiced.

HASMUKH: Where did you learn to say all that to your own father? 'Deprived childhood', 'prejudiced'! Who taught you to say all that to me? Your mother?

AJIT (worked up). Nobody taught me anything! Why is it that everything I say or do has to be something that somebody has told me or taught me to do!

The phone rings, Hasmukh answers.

HASMUKH(on the phone): Hello. Yes. No. Do it. Thank you. (Puts down the phone.) Now you can call Champak or whoever. I have received my call.

AJIT: That was the important call?

HASMUKH: Yes.

AJIT: I fail to understand the importance of that call.

HASMUKH: You fail. That's all. As usual.

Identifying Assertive & Aggressive Statements

Role play helped the students to understand practically the value of assertive statements and the need to practice them. They also thoroughly got the idea of how aggressive statements cause pain and suffering. The students could easily identify the assertive & aggressive statements in the given scene. The aggressive statements are underlined and are shared hereunder:

Aggressive Statements:

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HASMUKH: There's no need to do that. Just polish my shoes every morning and I'll be happy.

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Activity 2:

A popular technique called Broken Record technique is administered while conducting the activity. Students are given another handout containing a short conversation between two characters which helps them to understand the benefits of keeping cool and focusing on what to do and not to deviate from the objective. Students explain how one can make the conversation keeping the clarity about what you want, standing firm for the work, not losing the temper. Here, the one who is using the broken record has the clarity on what he/she wants and repeats the request without losing temper, understands the troubles and hurdles the other has but yet insists and gets the job done by the one whom he/she has assigned to. Here, in the activity, Istelle uses the Broken Record technique to make her husband do as agreed to.

Istelle: Darren, it's your turn to make the meal tonight. Everything you need is in the fridge.

Darren: I've got emails to do.

Istelle: I can see you have things you want to do, but I'd like you to start the meal now.

Darren: I'll do it when I've finished this.

Istelle: It's late and I'm sure you are as hungry as I am. I'd like you to do it now please while I have a bath.

Darren: You're always nagging me!

Istelle: I can see how you might feel I'm getting at you, but please, I want you to start the meal now.

Darren: God, you're just doing this assertive thing at me again and I hate it!

Istelle: That may be how it feels to you, but I'd like you to start cooking please.

Darren: Istelle, I've had a really hard day. Can't I just have a few minutes of peace and then I'll do it.

Istelle: I realize you've had a rough day. Please make us a meal now.

Darren: OK, OK, I'm doing it.

Tone of Voice

Tone of voice plays a major role in understanding the statements. It significantly changes the context and meaning of the statement. It is explicitly evident when people share jokes or funny stories. One person may share it in the funniest manner. The same may be presented by another in the most serious sense. Some studies present that meaning does not lie in what we say. Furthermore, it is said that less than 10% of meaning comes in the words said. Whereas, most of the time the meaning is understood not out of words but based on how we said the statements 'paralinguistic' i.e., tone of voice. The varying tone of voice reflects the degrees of disgust, sarcasm, rancor, and anger. This would lead to arguments, conflict, aggression, and tears.

Advantages of Assertive Statements over Aggressive Statements

It is easy to make aggressive statements but the impact is negative. The receiver always suffers either emotionally or psychologically with aggressive statements. It reflects the harsh tone of voice and is disruptive of emotions. Whereas, assertive statements send the message what is needed. What is expected from a person? It reflects the self-esteem of a person making the assertive statement. At the same time, it also respects the others involved. It reflects the sincerity in the tone, working style and approach to others. Here the communication is smooth and emotionally controlled. It represents civility and draws limits appropriately. It helps to accept and enjoy the differences with others.

Conclusion

It is important to know what 'respect' is and to instill this value in every individual. It is also important to understand one's own working style, thinking patterns while working with others. Only then, a step towards mastery over self and emotional control is possible. Furthermore, it is possible to develop the ability to communicate effectively but courteously. Assertiveness helps us to gain control over our emotions and trains us well to accept and enjoy the differences with others at the workplace.

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