

Assertiveness: a guide for the foundation year doctor

Introduction

Assertiveness (Lindsay, 2002) is an important tool if used appropriately at the right time and in the right manner. It is an aspect of communication that reflects confidence, faith and leadership attitude. Being assertive is a skill attained with time, experience and technique. Quite often, what you may think of as being assertive could be misinterpreted by others as being aggressive – there is a very thin demarcation between the two. Frequently, people expect foundation doctors beginning their careers to be passive and submissive, lacking experience and confidence.

Assertiveness also involves many other forms of non-verbal communication, which include body posture, eye contact, and tone, pitch and various others while speaking. You can keep a smile on your face and still be clear and confident in what you wish to say. You should always be calm and self-assured in conveying the message. This helps to maintain a pleasant working environment, as everyone likes to work with somebody who is easy to understand and composed. You get a lot of respect from others if you acquire this skill, no matter how junior you are on the career ladder.

Some techniques

Being assertive consists of showing that you understand the other person's point of view and stating your own point of view in a matter-of-fact way. You then suggest a solution, with the aim of achieving a 'win-win' situation. This does not necessarily mean getting your own way, nor does it mean having to feel belittled.

Miss Deepali Trivedi is Ophthalmologist in the Birmingham and Midland Eye Centre, Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust, Birmingham B18 7QH and **Dr Rachel Hooke** is the Working Time Directive (WTD) 2009 Implementation Manager, Airedale NHS Trust, Steeton, Keighley, West Yorkshire BD20 6TD

Correspondence to: Dr R Hooke

If English is not your first language, then this could inhibit you from saying things that you might otherwise want to say. Alternatively, cultural differences and difficulties may cause you to over-react without intending to. This can be overcome with time, experience and practising techniques such as the 'broken record', where you repeat a phrase until it appears to have sunk in. You should still not be prevented from communicating assertively.

Showing confidence

Assertiveness always parallels with confidence. Patients feel reassured when a doctor is assertive about the management options they have to offer. For instance, if you are confident about explaining the risks and benefits that go with any procedure, the patient may be able to understand better and find it easier to make a decision as they feel they are being managed by a confident person. Even if you do not know something, patients often appreciate it if you admit this confidently and state that you will check with someone else and get back to them.

Not only patients, but nursing staff, consultants and other colleagues do like someone who is assertive in their decision making but at the same time is also prepared to listen to everybody else's opinions. The kind of positive feedback that you receive from being assertive may help in the long run to boost and enhance an individual's self esteem and to ensure better performance.

Refusal need not offend

As mentioned earlier, assertiveness is an aspect of communication that is two-way, and you always have to keep in mind what others might interpret before saying anything. A negative mode may imply not agreeing to do something, for instance, a simple thing like saying 'no' to something. Learning to say no is still a very important aspect of being assertive.

On a busy day it might be very easy for someone to say no without realizing how

difficult it may be for someone else to hear being told no. You have to understand this, otherwise this could lead to an unhappy working environment, which nobody wants. When you are busy with work, it is sometimes difficult to think clearly about what is the best thing to do. Always listen to the person asking you to do something and think twice before saying no. You should always keep in mind: what is good for the patient and what suits you. When you are building your foundation as a doctor, learning to be tolerant and understanding is of paramount importance. At the same time you cannot be over-burdened with work just to please others.

Patient safety

Assertiveness can influence different kinds of people in different ways. There might be a particular task that needs doing which you are not experienced enough to carry out. Although there is always a first time, clinical safety is important here. Confidence in most practical skills is gained by doing the procedure several times. You become confident after being trained and prepared to do a task independently. It is always justifiable and safer to say no rather than taking a risk and mismanaging the case. Always seek help when you need to. A safe doctor is always appreciated.

There might be instances where you are capable of performing a task but, owing to time constraints or any other reason, you may not be able to do it. Once again, patient care takes priority, and sometimes you might have to work below your competence. Also, stress that if you spend time on a relatively low-level task, then patient care that truly requires your skills will be neglected. If you think it will not jeopardize patient care, then you can say no and carry on with your work.

Covering for colleagues

With increasing pressure within the NHS, you may be asked sometimes to cover for a colleague who has had to take urgent unplanned leave. It would be wise to cooperate with the place you are working

in but sometimes these events take place at the same time as training sessions or training opportunities which you might not want to sacrifice. You could always ask to rearrange the missed session at some other time. If you do not and such incidents keep recurring, then you will benefit

from being assertive enough to say no to covering for colleagues after giving a valid explanation.

There are, of course, times when others appear to be taking liberties with your good will, but an assertive approach can be used to tackle this. A passive attitude fol-

lowed by a sudden aggressive outburst can surprise and disconcert people, who do not realize the effect of their behaviour.

Conclusions

Assertiveness is an important tool that you can develop with time, experience and use of techniques. You should cultivate this skill during your time as a foundation doctor. You can then use it at every level in your career. It can work wonders when used calmly with confidence. [BJHM](#)

Conflict of interest: Dr Hooke has worked in both management and medicine.

Lindsay C (2002) Being assertive. *BMJ Career Focus* **324**: S27

KEY POINTS

- There is a fine line between being assertive and aggressive.
- Assertiveness is an important skill for foundation doctors to develop.
- Do not be afraid to say 'no' when appropriate.
- Patients appreciate a doctor who is clear, calm and confident.
- When dealing with colleagues, you have to consider your own needs as well as theirs and achieve a compromise for all.