

The International Journal for Direct Support Professionals

THE ART OF ASSERTION

By: Dave Hingsburger

Announcement: I am very pleased to announce that Chanelle Salonia who replaced Dave Hingsburger as the director of clinical and educational services at Vita Community Living in Toronto has agreed to also take over his role as co-editor for the journal. Chanelle has a long history with the journal as the co-author of the very first article, Volume 1: Issue 1, titled, “Unwrapping the Perfect Holidays: Tips for Staff Serving People with Intellectual Disabilities,” by Dave Hingsburger and Chanelle Salonia. She has been working in the field of disability studies for the past 17 years, which she entered as a direct support worker for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. She then worked as a board-certified behaviour analyst, supporting individuals with IDD and complex mental illness for several years before becoming the director of clinical and educational services. Welcome Chanelle!

This month’s article was written by Dave in May of this year. We are very happy to be able to share it with you.

“I should have told them that they need to listen to the DSP’s who know the client best.”

“I should have told my supervisor that I don’t like the tone of voice she uses when talking to me about expectations for the shift.”

“I should have told them that it’s patronizing to keep giving me the same instructions for the same task every day.”

All of us spend time wishing that we’d spoken up for ourselves with supervisors, with co-workers, and in meetings. In fact, afterwards, we tend to have the best conversations, saying just the right thing and getting annoyances off our chest – all in our head. But assertion is hard and being assertive, not angry, is a skill.

As much as our social media is full of memes about how good we are, and how strong we are, and how we matter, these things are hard to believe and even harder to be acted upon. But as much as it’s difficult, our voice needs to be heard in order for people with disabilities to get the best of service, and for our voices to get the right amount of airtime.

Editors: Angie Nethercott, M.A., RP
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Consider Jacklyn who sat through a meeting with the behaviour therapist, and the supervisor, and the whole team, and listened to recommendations that she knew wouldn't work. Instead of raising objections, she just stewed until she got in the car and could phone her fellow coworker to debrief. In that discussion, she had no difficulty itemizing why the recommendations wouldn't work; she felt better after the conversation.

But.

The client involved had to go through three months of a program that he would never, ever be successful at doing. His mood changed. He seemed defeated. He lost his appetite and was being considered for a new program about eating.

Jacklyn's silence was seen as consent. The behaviour therapist had to trust that people who knew the client best would speak up and help with the design of the program. But the difficulty was that the BT and the supervisor combined were intimidating to all the staff, not just Jacklyn. They didn't see the risk that Jacklyn would be taking by speaking up, those in power never do.

Assertion versus Aggression

Before we begin, let's just stop and think about what assertion is in comparison with aggression.

Assertion is the seeking of balance. It takes into consideration the rights and needs of those around you, while clearly stating your point of view. The goal is to bring everything back into balance.

Aggression has one goal, regardless of those around you, their needs, and wants, and desires don't play a role in what you have set out to do ... win.

Here are some hints:

Assertion is a skill, decide to learn it.

Once you start thinking about assertion, you will notice that, if you aren't good at it in one area of your life, you probably aren't good at it in most areas of your life. This means that you've gone to movies you'd rather not see, you've eaten meals that you didn't want, you've attended parties where you neither know nor like the people there. And you've watched people with disabilities struggling through programs that don't fit them and are unlikely to work.

So, making the decision that you are going to use your voice more, to express your opinion more, and to start taking a bit more control of your life is a big one. But a decision is just a decision, it's not action. Many people speak about assertion as something you decide to be, and that's that. Well, as in much of life, that is very seldom that.

Understand that you are deciding to change how you interact with the world and the people in it, this is going to take a little bit of time, and you may find it a little more difficult than you might think. So, give yourself time and permission to fail, it will happen – learning anything means a dedication to trying, and failing until you've got it right.

Your first act of change will be your first act of assertion.

Imagine that you've spent months thinking about learning to be more assertive. Imagine that you just simply started voicing your opinions. People may be in shock. Remember the person you were before you just handed control over to your partners, your bosses, and coworkers and just let people roll over you. At first, it may have frustrated them, "Why won't she ever tell me what she wants? Why do I always have to choose the restaurant? Why won't she just pick the damn movie?" But, over time, they may have gotten used to your acquiescence and even a small choice, freely made, can be received poorly.

So just straight up tell them what you are doing and what you are wanting to achieve. I used to do workshops for parents about reinforcement, and I always told them to tell their kids that they were going to try to change how they interacted with them, it was going to be more positive. This advice came from a situation where one parent called to tell me that they went home all enthused and just started praising their kid.

It had the wrong reaction; it scared the heck out of the kids. So, any change that might cause people to pause and wonder what is going on with you, tell them.

Assertion is a skill that works in a variety of different ways. We are slipping away now to look at assertion at work. Many of you might be shuddering at this; we are talking now about how you make your living, and that makes this one scary. There may be too much risk for you but not dealing with it has its own risks. You may become embittered, and you may take that out on other people.

Here are some hints:

Choose the battle you wish to fight.

If you are like me, I let fights, and slights, and disagreements build up. So, when I do decide to do something, without incredible self-restraint, I end up tossing the whole slop bucket into what was supposed to be a focused chat. Why? For a lot of people, there is a mix-up between assertion and aggression. Open the pin on one and watch out!

Therefore, it's really important that you focus on one thing that needs to air. I know it's tempting to air all concerns, but it's not the time, and this is very high-risk behaviour. So, narrow it down, be absolutely clear on what the problem is, if you can't explain it to yourself. Okay, that's part one done. Now you have to be clear on what you are asking for in relation to the problem you are presenting. Once again, you aren't asking for a fix for everything, it's just a simple equation.

Problem + Discussion = Resolution

But it's not that simple is it. We work in a hierarchical system; we provide service of such a quality that it passes government compliance audits. That, plus all our bosses have bosses who will be looking at anything that comes from the meeting from their point of view. There are many things that can go wrong, and be prepared that they might, also be prepared to hear a 'No' that comes from somewhere else. But let's not be negative, a lot of things can go right too.

In discussing your concerns, you need to use clear, descriptive statements.

For anyone who has taken a course in behaviour therapy, this should be easy. Behavioural language means that you are able to speak clearly, give relevant examples, compile, and present data. Getting this done is a huge part of your preparation for the meeting. In some journals, the recommendations regarding assertion state that you need to talk about your thoughts and feelings. I'm going to suggest, however, that for direct support professionals, the goal should be sharing your thoughts only. You must know that, in working with people, we are often accused of being 'over-involved' and as having 'lost perspective' ... and that's because we bring too much emotion to the table. State your facts, your ideas for a solution, and be done with it. Consider these three conversations:

Thanks for taking time to talk with me. I'm wanting to discuss how we do the toileting and showering for the clients in our home. Right now, 82 percent of the time that I'm on shift, I get assigned these tasks. I don't mind carrying my own weight, but I'm feeling that the chores are unequally assigned.

Yes, I'd like to raise a concern with you, I want to raise a concern about the behaviour plan; if we implement this, we as staff will be collecting three times as much data as we do now. I'm afraid it just seems unrealistic at our present staffing levels.

Hey, I know you know this house better than me, but I wonder if, when you come in, we talk like co-workers and plan the evening out together. I'd like to be a bit more involved than I am right now.

You'll notice that the last one didn't use data; many co-workers would see the use of data in a discussion as aggressive and threatening. You may even be accused of spying on your co-worker. That's never a good way to relationship build! (And besides – really – spying? Like the Russian government is not waiting until they learn what kind of crispy chicken you prefer before they take action).

Again, a good clean statement of the problem and a suggestion for change. It's that simple; it's keeping it together while you do this that's hard.

Relax, it will be over soon.

As has been hinted at all the way through this article, assertion, even with a handy set of tips, is difficult. There are so many emotions around becoming assertive and avoiding aggression. Let's face it, sometimes, we need extra fuel to merely get the courage to speak up. I'd like to depersonalize this, but I think I need to be honest. For the longest time, people who supervised me saw me as an angry staff who was poor at taking direction. They all got me wrong, I wasn't angry about some situation somewhere, I was anxious and fearful in the here and now. I was just using anger as the motivator to speak up and, even now, years later, I'm always having to clarify myself about my fears and use that energy appropriately.

It was while doing some reading for one of my clients that I discovered an approach for myself. I read about stress inoculation in relationship to PTSD and recognized and adapted some of the techniques and, it was so successful, I use it to this very day. First, I focus on my breathing, then I focus on my thoughts and weed out all the negative thoughts I have about myself, leaving me using positive words about myself and my ability to handle the situation. This was much

harder than I thought it would be. It's gotten easier over the years, but I still have to work to silence those critical voices that can dredge up the worst of me. Then in the silence that followed, I imagined the conflict, my simple statement, my suggestion for change, and then my calm delivery of those words. In the end, the pictures in my head led to a successful resolution. But the real success was not the end of the story, it was my calm, relaxed use of assertion that I was meant to admire.

Now, there is much more to stress inoculation and, even then, this is my personal adaptation to it. For me, it works; you need to figure a way for you to handle your nerves, you have to manage your voice, find an approach that fits.

'No' is always a possibility (but so is 'yes').

As much as you may imagine success, it isn't guaranteed, so that can't be measured as the only indicator of success. The successful thing you want is control over your approach, not the reception that your ideas get.

You need to prepare yourself that you may hear some version of the word 'no.' If you can get through this without losing your cool, you will have won something – their respect. Believe me, that's a pretty good place to be; 'pushover you' is beginning to become 'pushback you.' They will begin to see who you are, what you bring to the table, and what your capabilities are.

But more than all that, you used your voice, you spoke up, that is really your only responsibility. That means that those with whom you have spoken to are aware of your thoughts, and it's your voice they will remember in the future under similar circumstances.

But sometimes you are heard, and the action you suggest is taken. Go to your car, your home and, in private, cheer about your success. But when you are around other people, don't gloat; the only thing worse than a sore loser is a prideful winner. It's not a good look.

Summary

We often arrive at adulthood without adequate preparation. Oh we may be good at grammar, we may always be able to find the value of "x" in algebra, we may know the capital of Burkina Faso, but none of those things will get us through a shift with someone who has trouble listening to us, or through a meeting with a supervisor who doesn't see what goes on when she's not there, or through a review of a Behaviour Support Plan written by someone who hasn't even seen the behaviour. In fact, in school, we were rewarded for not talking, not stating a different point of view; they loved compliance, and they saw assertion as problematic.

So, just because it wasn't taught, doesn't mean you can't learn the skill. Hopefully, there are some hints here that will help you become assertive without slipping into aggression.

About the author

Dave Hingsburger, M.Ed., is the former director of clinical and educational services at Vita Community Living Services. Dave lectured internationally and published several books and articles in reference to disability. He provided training to staff, parents, and people with disabilities regarding sexuality, abuse prevention, self-esteem, and behavioural approaches. He developed 'Disability-Informed Therapy' as part of his work towards creating safe spaces for people with disabilities to live and work.

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