

## Aggression versus Assertiveness

*I was standing in a room filled with people when Clifford (not his real name) came up to me. Clifford was a large set man, a little shorter than me. He stood very close, our noses only a few inches apart, and for five minutes he screamed at me, accused me, and was generally aggressive without physically touching me. For my part, I maintained my presence, spoke occasionally as his anger permitted, and took on board none of the venom he was clearly filled with. It was an interesting period because I did not feel threatened or unsafe. I did not feel his comments were accurate or justified. When he finally exhausted himself, largely because he was unable to get a rise from me, he disengaged and went about his business. Others in the room were more shaken than I was. My boss observed the episode, and I said to him, "I need to learn to be assertive." His response, which I have always remembered was, "You are assertive. Clifford is aggressive." I gained sudden and clear insight that there was indeed a difference.*

I don't claim to be assertive all the time; that I should be so perfect. In fact it was a positive point when I learned to connect with my anger properly because it is a powerful tool for someone seeking to be assertive. Anger, misused, is a weapon of the aggressor. Anger,



*Are you maintaining your boundaries (assertive) or invading someone else's (aggressive)?*

### Author

[Stephen Harrison](#) BSc (Hons), PMP, FPMINZ, ACC

### Abstract

*Explores the difference between aggression and assertiveness, how to recognise each, and develop the latter.*

### Keywords

Aggressive, aggression, assertive, assertion, boundary, maintain boundaries

### First Published

August 2005

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cultivated and targeted with skill, is a tool of the assertive person. The aggressor invades other people's boundaries. The assertive person protects, strengthens and maintains their boundaries with the appropriate use of anger, and seeks what they want without invading the boundaries of others in the process.

The following is a simple self-assessment of whether you are assertive or aggressive. It is not intended to be an exhaustive description of contributing factors. The intent is to stimulate thought and raise questions. You hold the answers.

***Do you allow other people to trample your boundaries and invade your personal space without response?*** If this is a consistent experience, you are neither aggressive nor assertive. You quite likely lack self-esteem and self-confidence, and/or have little clue about what really matters to you (lack of direction). The result is a lack of clear boundaries and/or lack of integrity in maintaining and enforcing them. Check yourself for issues related to self-worth. In exchanges with others, do you come away feeling violated, that something in you is not pleased with the treatment you receive, yet you still do nothing about it? You probably rely on being aloof or calling for

pity from others as a means for controlling situations and gaining advantage. Other qualities of the 'doormat,' for want of a better term, is that you concede on all issues, and put others first because you feel they are better than you. Often you act from some sense of duty, to meet others' expectations, to people-please, or because it is safer than putting yourself forward. To stop being a doormat, recognise that you are important, worthy, and that you do not deserve the garbage being dumped on you. Find your individual value and self-worth, and develop it so you believe you have value and know you deserve to be treated as such. Reach the point where you can say, "Enough is enough. I will not put up with this anymore." A doormat is easy prey to the bully.

***Do you take the offensive and seek to gain power from others by overwhelming them?*** Whether this is emotionally, physically, intellectually or spiritually, you are aggressive. You are manifesting classic control and dominate tendencies. A great question to explore is what insecurity is driving you? In what way do you feel inadequate so that you feel the need to control others? Such is an illusion and at some point you might well meet your match and be confronted with all the inadequacy you have sought to protect yourself from. Aggression or the violation of others' boundaries is violence, seeking power over others by invading their space. Simply stated, you are a bully. The exit path for you is to recognise that wanting something or someone does not create entitlement, and that others also deserve space to live and breathe. Get real about the number of people you have hurt, cajoled into submission, and over whom you have attempted to dominate. As a bully you prey on those you consider weak and easy fodder. At heart, if you are a bully you are a coward! What is the fear that is driving your need to dominate? How can you develop the areas in which you feel inadequate so you may develop real power in your life?

***Do you manage your personal boundaries from invasion by others, exerting sufficient power to prevent yourself being violated and your integrity intact?*** If you do this without having to attack others, you are being

assertive. If your response is a counter attack into the other person's space, you are responding to aggression with aggression. The assertive individual is clear about their boundaries, will use the power of positive anger to strengthen and defend boundaries but does not seek to impose or force others in the process. As an assertive person, you are comfortable with your own views, values, beliefs, and do not impose on or expect others to have the same stance. You also tend to be comfortable with your inadequacies. The assertive person has self-confidence, exudes personal power, and does not need to manipulate others as part of being true to self.

## Challenge

As humans, none of us are perfect. I use all of the above at different times. Self-improvement comes from awareness of our behaviours, and then consciously intercepting the inappropriate behaviours and choosing better alternatives. Life has a habit of providing plenty of opportunity for us to see our inadequacies, at which point we get to make a choice: do we continue as we are, or do we choose an alternate response to a circumstance, and thereby change our outcomes? Until we see ourselves, have awareness, we are as animals operating from instinct.

Awareness is the first step to greatness, and greatness is consciously choosing and acting with authenticity to ourselves. The next time you are in a situation where someone is being aggressive, or wonder where your own burst of anger came from, start explore how you may be more assertive, and how you can create a positive result from the circumstances that you are in. Determine how you can promote what you are seeking without denigrating others or their ideas in the process. Your assertiveness is increasing, and you are working more fully from personal power.

***For more information related to themes in this article, refer to chapter 5 (Survive Reactions) and chapter 9 (Developing Personal Power) of:*** Harrison, S. G. (2012). [Appreciate the Fog: Embrace Change with Power and Purpose](#). Auckland, New Zealand: Xlibris Corporation.

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