



Are You Assertive Enough? Test Your Strength

By Stefanie Smith

Everyone wants to be liked. Everyone also wants to be treated with respect. Unfortunately, these two impulses sometimes are difficult to balance—but not impossible. You can be both liked and treated respectfully if you learn how to assert yourself properly.

If you recognize your lack of assertiveness in the signals below, don't worry. You're in the excellent company of respected and talented professionals. If to date you have prioritized advancing others, you can now harness your talents to advance yourself.

1. You want to be liked so you avoid giving real feedback.

I know an attorney who leads a prestigious law firm. He is polished, respected and connected to the highest academic and professional circles. Several years ago, he hired an associate who simply wasn't working out. His partners complained, his clients complained and he was constantly frustrated. He had her spending half her time on firm marketing, which she did well. After two years, he told her he only needed her part time. She left for a marketing position at a larger firm at double the salary.

When I asked him to reflect on how he could have sooner reduced the stress, morale damage and expense, he postulated, "More feedback at her first year review and then six months to gage her response would have reduced the time frame to 18 months." I suggested, "Giving her feedback every three months and making your final decision clear at her first year review would have made everyone happier after 12 months."

- Don't wait for formal annual reviews. Provide real feedback and constructive comments every three months. No forms, but simple notes to provide a record of the meetings. Minor investments of time and effort will yield major returns in productivity and morale.
- Listen attentively when your colleagues or team members consistently comment about an employee. You don't need to act on every recommendation on the spot. But don't ignore their observations either. Keep notes and look for patterns.

2. Your boss knows what you do, but doesn't know all you do.

A very talented woman handles budgets, audits, legal procedures, and highly sensitive matters for the chairman and CEO of a Fortune 100 corporation. While reviewing her work, I asked if the CEO was aware of all she managed. Her priceless response: "He knows what I do—he just doesn't know all I do."

Are You Assertive Enough? Test Your Strength (cont.)

After several coaching sessions, she realized that even if she executes everything to perfection, her boss would benefit from knowing of her accomplishments. She wrote her first status report after 24 years on the executive floor. The CEO's response? A special trip to her office to say, "This is a lot of work." She told me that simple statement was the greatest recognition she'd ever received.

- Write regular one–two page updates to inform your boss of your achievements. Raise questions needed to maintain project momentum. Organize the content to reflect his priorities. Through this basic practice, your boss can quickly learn what you are doing, ask questions, direct resources, and approve spending—an efficient use of executive time.
- Align your job description with achieving "wins" your superior can share in the Board room or the clubhouse bar. Get her press coverage by fostering relations with journalists. Help him refine his public speaking or hire someone who can. Suggest a way to honor or assist a valued client.

3. Your title hasn't changed in years—neither has your salary.

Are you a dedicated employee who does so much more than your job description? Do you keep everything running? Great! When asked about the discrepancy between your title or salary and your actual contribution, maybe you say, "It's OK, I'm just here to do a good job." That is not OK at all—not for you, your boss, or your company.

How can senior executives make the best decisions about your responsibilities and professional growth if they don't have full information? That's right, they can't. An accurate title with commensurate compensation affirms your professional and personal identity. Your advancement also motivates your team, colleagues and clients who prefer to report to and transact with someone whose position reflects a higher level role. Your promotion also reflects positively on your boss's leadership capabilities.

Finally, an appropriately higher position reflects on the prestige and bench strength of the company.

- Update your job description and submit both old and new to your boss with the changes pointed out.
- Revise your résumé as if you meant it. Pass it on to headhunters for title and salary market comparisons. The knowledge empowers you whether you decide to stay or search, and you'll increase your self-assurance. You may find yourself well paid or choose your current position over a potential salary increase because of factors meaningful to you.

4. You never go out for lunch because there's no time.

The CEO of a London-based international food importing firm lamented the lack of coordination among her senior executives. I asked, "When was the last time you took them all out to lunch?" She could not recall. We set up monthly team lunches at great restaurants that buy their imported specialties. She briefly addresses the team and invites each person to raise new developments or top-of-mind questions. She reports that these lunches generate more productive energy and profitable ideas than she could have imagined.

Are You Assertive Enough? Test Your Strength (cont.)

- Schedule lunches with colleagues or clients once a week for the upcoming four weeks. You can always reschedule if a conflict or urgency arises. An in-person exchange of ideas allows for eye contact and body language whereas phone and email do not. If you work from home, it will get you outside for some fresh air and fresh ideas. Leaving the office to break bread:
 - builds relationships
 - boosts productivity
 - makes conversation more effective and enjoyable
 - facilitates future communication and decision making.
- Find great places to eat out alone. Take the paper, take work documents, or grab a sandwich and take a walk. Whether editing a proposal or lost in your thoughts, you'll convey you have enough balance and self-respect to walk away for an hour and return recharged.

5. You haven't learned anything new in years.

In the movies, the martial arts guys constantly practice in the dojo. Jean-Claude Van Damme didn't let his muscles atrophy between fights. Athletes come back each season or Olympics stronger than before. They learn new moves and techniques to stay ahead—so should you.

- Suggest a training budget and development plan to learn new skills tied to strategic goals. If you are turned down completely, consider the implications. Briefly. Then take action on your own behalf.
- Own the responsibility for your professional growth:
 - perform pro bono projects to build skills
 - research topics on the Internet
 - attend free workshops by vendors and organizations
 - participate in alumni association events
 - register for adult ed evening classes
 - watch DVDs or listen to audiotapes
 - read books on new topics.

If it is too challenging to apply these recommendations on your own, engage a mentor or coach to help you get on the right track and guide you forward. Pro athletes in every sport have trainers, which only adds to their prowess. When bodybuilders work their muscles, they “flex with a purpose.” You can do the same to evoke your inner warrior consistent with your unique personality and motivations. Please [contact me](#) to share your success stories.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Stefanie Smith leads Stratex, an executive consulting and coaching firm based in Manhattan. As an executive consultant, she works with business and government leaders to plan and execute strategic projects. Stefanie Smith also provides customized group workshops and private coaching programs to help executives and their teams reach the next performance level. For more information, see www.stratexcoaching.com, speak with her directly, or subscribe to her blog at www.coachstef.com.