

What Is Civilized Assertiveness?

Civilized Assertiveness is a new approach to communication designed especially for today's women. It grew out of my experiences teaching thousands of women in hundreds of communication classes over the past twenty years. In that time, I have been impressed, charmed, and inspired by my students, who bring pressing needs and important questions to each seminar.

- * "I am the top producer in my office and yet my ideas are often ignored. Should I try to operate more like a man so I will be listened to and taken seriously?"
- * "I am a 'people pleaser' and often give in to others just to keep things pleasant. How can I be decent and considerate and yet be forceful enough to get ahead?"

- * “I need to be tougher to succeed in my job but I don’t want to be obnoxious. How can I go after what I want without being pushy?”
- * “My husband (kids/friends/relatives) sometimes makes me feel like a doormat. How can I get more respect? Without nagging, how can I get my family to do some of the housework?”
- * “How can I request and get a raise without whining?”

Over the years, I have heard a clear call for a new way to communicate that combines strength with decency. Women want to find a way to stand up for their rights, accomplish their goals, and be taken seriously—without violating the moral codes they have always used to relate to the larger world. They have found that using traditional feminine speech seems to leave them behind at the gates of power. But they have also found that borrowing traditionally masculine speech often produces a backlash.

My research in developmental psychology, psycholinguistics, and male and female communication styles confirmed what my students were experiencing firsthand. **Women’s traditional way of speaking puts them at a serious disadvantage.** Using non-assertive speech patterns undermines their competence and status at work and diminishes their influence in relationships. This critical fact led me to pinpoint communication differences that are barriers to women’s success. I identified non-assertive speech and ineffective communication styles that set women apart. To counteract these effects, I culled the best of the time-honored assertiveness techniques and developed new ones. The goal was to give women new ways to speak and behave that project strength and confidence.

The reports from women in my seminars about their experiences in the workplace and “what really works” and “what doesn’t work” were invaluable in identifying which organizational behaviors of men that women should adopt and which should be modified or discarded altogether. In addition to considering “What is the effective thing to do?” my students also considered “What is the right thing to do?” There has been a remarkable consensus about which behaviors they felt they could in all conscience adopt and which behaviors they could not, because it violated fundamental values. For example, they were comfortable adopting men’s style of seeking out constructive criticism, but they rejected using one-upmanship and put-downs as ways to establish authority.

Women don’t want to buy into an aggressive style, but on the other hand they don’t want to be “patsies.” Often, they see-saw between passive and aggressive behavior. They are tired of the whipsaw of giving in and giving way because it seems natural, and then overcorrecting and becoming angry and aggressive because they’ve given away too much. Women want to become more balanced in their dealings with others. They want insights, techniques, and guidelines that allow them to:

- Get ahead and get promoted
- Say “No”
- Confront undesirable behavior
- Define and maintain personal boundaries
- Set limits with manipulative people
- Be taken seriously
- Take credit for ideas and work
- Express anger appropriately
- Stop being “nicey-nice”
- Stand up to aggressive people
- Ask for what they want without feeling guilty
- Give and accept criticism

- Negotiate at work and in their personal life
- Stop apologizing for everything
- Stand up for their ideas in the face of opposition
- Have equal relationships with men

Before the 20th century advent of feminism, women questioned whether they deserved equal pay, equal treatment, equal work, equal opportunities, time off for themselves and all the other things men assume are their natural right. As we begin the 21st century, a majority of women have answered that question with a resounding, “YES WE DO!!!” Now the vital question is “What do I say to get it?” We have the conviction—now we need the words.

So Civilized Assertiveness evolved in response to women’s needs to speak and behave in ways that will get them more of what they want. Civility and assertiveness are considered together because they are two sides of the same coin. **Civility is ethical behavior toward others. Assertiveness is ethical behavior toward ourselves.** In the absence of civility, we act primarily out of self-interest. In the absence of assertiveness, we act without self-interest. Neither course is healthy or desirable.

The focus of Civilized Assertiveness is to balance relationships, not control them; to gain esteem from oneself, not approval from others; to possess “power to,” not “power over.” It is a comprehensive system that flows from four essential communication skills—Listen, Limit, Assert, Negotiate—and rests on three ethical principles—Respect, Mindfulness, and Balance. Civilized Assertiveness combines women’s traditional strength of relating to others with their current need to be confident, competent and influential in important issues at work and in life. It gives women a strong, ethical voice—and with voice comes power.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

First and foremost, this is a “how to“ book. It teaches the reader specific assertive words and phrases that identify her as a self-respecting, competent person who is to be listened to and taken seriously. At the same time, the book identifies non-assertive, powerless speech habits and self-diminishing talk that women need to banish from their vocabulary.

The first five chapters set the stage for later skills, principles and “how to” steps by demonstrating what Civilized Assertiveness is, why women need it, and why assertiveness does not come naturally for many women. These chapters include a questionnaire and a personal Bill of Rights. They speak to the heart and spirit—I urge you to read them before you move on to the skills.

The middle section of the book teaches the ethical principles and communication skills of Civilized Assertiveness. It provides detailed explanations of how these principles and skills work and what they mean through numerous examples and scripts which illustrate the skills in practice. Take the time to absorb these chapters—even read some of the statements out loud—so that you can become more comfortable in using the words and understanding the concepts behind them.

The last chapters center on women in the workplace. There are more scripts that address common dilemmas and illustrate the civilized and assertive way to solve them, as well as descriptions of special problems women encounter in the workplace and how to handle them with grace. The final chapter pulls together the skills, strategies, and “how-to” steps by integrating them with the Ten Commandments of Civilized Assertiveness for work and in life.