SOUTHERN EARLY CHILDHOOD ASSOCIATION

The Leadership Letter

Assertive or a Bully? What's the Difference?

In this newsletter, we're going to take a look at an issue that affects many areas of your life...your workplace, your position on a board of directors, your personal life.

There is a fine line between assertiveness and bullying and, often, the definition placed on one's behavior has to do with the person who is responding to and perceiving that behavior.

To some, being outspoken is a positive sign of assertiveness. To others, it's a sign of someone who bullies and monopolizes conversations and interactions.

For women, the issue can be particularly sensitive. In workplace environments, women often have a smaller range of acceptable behaviors and some behaviors by men that would be considered positive and valued are considered negative if exhibited by women. If women are decisive and competitive, the way they are perceived doesn't always translate positively.

Since the field of early childhood education is predominantly female, some of the "heat" is removed from perceptions of behavior; however, as you move into leadership positions, either in the workplace or within your association, these perceptions begin to matter significantly.

Here are some **tips** (for both men and women) that may help you to be perceived in an assertive, positive manner.

1) **Listen to Others:** Although you are passionate about your beliefs, allow people to disagree. Assertiveness doesn't translate to ignoring others and refusing to listen to their perspectives. You don't have all the answers!

2) **Learn to Compromise**. Once divergent opinions have been expressed, learn how to find common ground. If you're an advocate, this is a skill that you certainly need to have.

3) **Support Positive Change**: Change is hard for most people and backing people into corners won't benefit anyone. Maintain your positions but be ready to work with others. Trying to force others (bullying) to accept your positions and solutions won't work in the long run.

Remember that assertiveness translates to stating your opinions clearly and concisely, listening to other opinions, being flexible enough to modify your ideas, and working as a "team" to implement changes that are needed. Good leaders/managers know when to be assertive and when to sit back and listen.

Resource: *The Fine Art of Female Assertiveness, Marcia Reynolds, www.psychologytoday.com,* Retrieved 3/26/2014

Leadership Commission Members

- *Anita Dailey, GA*
- *Marti Nicholson, OK*
- *Susan Barnes, VA*
- *Crystal Campbell, SC*
- *Jeffrey Leffler, MS*

Assertiveness Doesn't Equal Anger or Aggression

You have an employee or board member that spirals out of control with a temper that's hard to tame. She/he displays behavior that is perceived by colleagues as aggressive, veering toward bullying, and you've got to do something to change the situation. **This employee isn't assertive: this employee is just angry.**

She is a valued employee in her role with the program (or board) but her behavior is causing disruption and distress for her colleagues. Some of her anger is channeled into passive/aggressive responses and that's causing even more disruption. The anger may have a basis in the workplace or it may be on a personal level. **Regardless, it's your problem because you're the manager/ leader.**

Healthy anger can be a good thing and, as early childhood educators, we spend a great deal of time helping children learn to deal with impulsiveness, anger and inappropriate responses to frustration. By the time we're adults, we should have learned how to channel those impulses but that's not al-

ways the case. *"People who are constantly putting others down, criticizing everything, and making cynical comments haven't learned how to constructively express their anger."*

As a manager, you've got to find a solution. This means either removing the employee (and that means hiring and retraining) or you've got to try some strategies to help her learn to **suppress, redirect and calm.**

Your employee handbook should clearly delineate how inappropriate behavior within the workplace will be handled. Employee policies and procedures usually outline a series of steps to take with an employee prior to termination that includes several rounds of manager to employee counseling, all documented and placed in the employee's file. These steps most often reflect an increasing penalty for behavior that doesn't change and provides the basis for eventual termination if it becomes necessary.

If it's a Board member that you are dealing with, it's a different situation. Removal from the Board

may not be possible and controlling and challenging that inappropriate behavior becomes the job of the President. The **September 2013** issue of *The Leadership Letter* is devoted to conflict resolution in a board of directors and you may find useful ideas there.

"People who are easily angered generally have what some psychologists call a low tolerance for frustration, meaning simply that they feel that they should not have to be subjected to frustration, inconvenience, or annoyance. They can't take things in stride, and they're particularly infuriated if the situation seems somehow unjust: for example, being corrected for a minor mistake."

Regardless of whether this is a workplace or volunteer issue, there are no easy answers.

Assertiveness is a positive trait. Anger and aggressiveness are not.

Resource: Controlling Anger Before It Controls You, American Psychological Association, www.apa.org, Retrieved 3/26/14

ASSERTIVENESS: A Personal Positive

"Assertiveness is the ability to positively and constructively state your rights or needs without violating the rights of others. When you use direct, open, and honest communication in relationships to meet your personal needs, you feel more confident, gain respect from others, and live a happier, fulfilled life. Acting assertive helps maintain honesty in relationships, allows you to feel more in control of your world, and improves your ability to make decisions."

Go to http://www.utexas.edu/hr/current/services/informational/assertiveness.html to get some tips on how to make that personal journey. *Resource: Assertiveness Skills for Current Employees, University of Texas, www.utexas.edu/hr, Retrieved 3/26/14*

Getting Employees to Speak Up

We all know the employee or board member that has great ideas but won't speak up during meetings. They may be naturally shy or just afraid of the response they'll receive if they participate and contribute. They are probably the children from the past who wouldn't raise their hands in class unless the teacher specifically called on them.

If you have an employee or board member that you know has good ideas but tends not to share, there are some things you can do to help them **become more assertive** and contribute to the organization.

1) **Ask for their feedback**. Just like the teacher who called on them in class, you can solicit their responses and feedback. For most people who don't participate, group settings are difficult. See if you can figure out how to do this initially one-on-one and then gradually integrate this strategy into team or board meetings. Don't ignore others to implement this strategy. Just make sure that you're providing the opportunity for this person to participate.

2) **Thank them for sharing.** A simple "thank you" goes a long way and helps to build confidence. It someone feels that their ideas and contributions are valued, they are more likely to open up and share more frequently.

3) **Point out the risk of not speaking up.** This person (quite often a young person who's just getting started) may have all the talent in the world and could be on a fast track to assume more responsibility; however, their failure to contribute is perceived as a negative and can adversely impact their chance for promotion or leadership opportunities. If they're working as a team (as boards do), that group is losing the benefit of their contributions and the success of a project or operation may be at risk.

4) **Encourage them to learn public speaking.** The dreaded speech class is not the answer! As a manager, you can provide them many opportunities to learn in a safe environment. Why not let them lead a parent meeting or do a presentation with your board? Baby steps with lots of support will help them to become comfortable with public speaking opportunities. There are also community groups that mentor and nurture public speakers.

5) **Ask them to develop a plan for a team meeting or to help develop an agenda**. Some people are more comfortable putting their ideas down on paper at first. If you ask them to develop a team or board meeting agenda with your support, they will begin to organize their thoughts and think through how to share those thoughts. Ask them to lead the discussion on one item of the agenda. You can sit back and relax!

6) **Accept both written and verbal feedback**. Some folks just won't get to the point of speaking up much during a meeting. There are introverts and extroverts and we're not going to change personalities. Find a way to provide a communication channel for everyone and publicly recognize those whose contributions come through alternate channels.

Many community organizations provide "*assertiveness training*" or public speaking opportunities that can benefit your board or workplace. This training teaches persons to **COMMUNICATE** in a way that's interactive, respectful of others and contributory. If you feel that you have a significant number of employees or board members that could benefit from this training, check out your community resources.

Remember, being assertive can provide big benefits for both employee and employer. New ideas, constructive criticism can all contribute to the success of the workplace. (This holds true as well for boards of directors.)

If you're in a management or leadership position, it's assumed that you have learned to be assertive along the way or you wouldn't be there. That doesn't mean that you can't hone your skills. Take advantage of opportunities to increase your skills as a manager or leader and assume the role as mentor for those who need a helping hand. *Source: 6 Ways to Get Shy Employees to Speak Up, www.cbsnews.com, Retrieved 3/26/14*
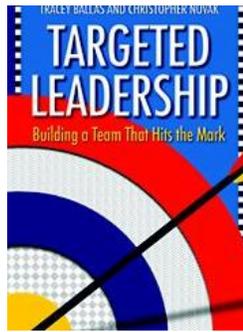
More Resources

Targeted Leadership (2010)

www.gryphonhouse.com

This is an essential resource for leaders to use when polishing their skills, as well as fostering them in their staff members. Whether you are creating a vision for the team you wish to recruit, empowering new staff members through orientation, coaching and training, or energizing experienced staff members with team building, *Targeted Leadership* provides you with the tools you need to transform your team. This book includes a CD-ROM with printable handouts for training or classroom use.

The Leadership Letter
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- *Board Conflict*
- *What Triggers Conflict?*
- *How to Manage Conflict*
- *Let's Remain Friends!*

Find it on the Leadership page of the SECA website.

Team Building: The Fun Stuff!

You're working on helping your employees to become more assertive, increasing their contributions to your agency or board.

You've worked through your strategies to avoid conflict and defuse anger.

Now's the time to look at **team building strategies** to build productivity, innovation, creativity, and agility into your organization.

Team building exercises can be a "*powerful way to unite a group, develop strengths, and address weaknesses*" or it can be a monumental waste of time! Planning is the key and should revolve around some basic questions:

- Are there conflicts between individuals of the team? Is this causing disruption in the team's operation?

- Do team members know each other or should that be a goal of the exercise? If it's a brand new team, getting to know each other will be important.

- Are some members aggressive and focused solely on themselves?

- Is the communication within the group positive or does it break down?

- Does the team "work as a team" or is it just a group of individuals working side by side?

- Are some members resistant to change? Does this affect the team's progress?

- How is the group's morale? Does it need a boost?

When you've answered these questions, you'll have some idea where to start. You want to plan something that will make each member of the team feel valued and included and you certainly want them to leave the exercise without feeling that they wasted their time. These exercises are usually laid back and fun but that doesn't mean that they can't meet certain goals and objectives.

Make sure to keep competition out of these exercises. After all, you're trying to build a team, not see who as an individual can be the most successful! *Mind Tools* is a website that contains many resources, including suggestions on team building exercises.

Resource: Team Building Exercises: Planning Activities That Actually Work, www.mindtools.com, Retrieved 3/26/14