

Assertiveness: your ability to put your needs, thoughts and opinions out into the world—even when doing so invites opposition or conflict or causes you to take a stand, manifesting behaviorally as self-assuredness, confidence and drive.

You can overdo anything—even a strength. In fact, sometimes a strength holds so much allure and power for you that there is a temptation to draw that tool first and to be reluctant to put it down—even when it is not serving you.

There are four ways to overdo a strength:

1. Frequency – I engage the behavior too often and it becomes repetitive and predictable.
2. Intensity – I put too much emphasis on or passion behind the behavior.
3. Duration – I engage the behavior for too long and it becomes tedious and loses its effect.
4. Context – The behavior is just the wrong tool/approach for a given time or situation.

Overdone Assertiveness can be a debilitating problem. Excessive Assertiveness tends to yield feedback that you are:

- Aggressive
- Abusive
- Militant or even bossy
- Self-centered (commanding the spotlight and excessive air-time)

Relationship Expression

The opinionated, confrontational and even bullying behaviors that result from excessive Assertiveness can be toxic to a personal relationship, for over-engaged Assertiveness will express more interest in winning or controlling than connecting or harmonizing. Behind the motive of honesty and clarity, sharp-edged directives even criticisms will flow freely, and rarely will the will of the overly assertive partner give way to the needs or desires of the partner.

Leadership Expression

Directive and bossy, the overly assertive leader will be quick to compete, control and criticize. Commonly found (and even encouraged) in highly hierarchical and authority-driven organizations, the leader who overdoes Assertiveness tends to take a “my way or the highway” approach on most issues and decisions, which—while clear and unambiguous—diminishes buy-in, communication, creativity and innovation.

Team and Organizational Expressions

Teams and Organizations with over-engaged Assertiveness develop cultures in which the strongest and most successful (and sometimes the most vocal and commanding) earn the most respect. Reflection, interpersonal sensitivity, political correctness—even politeness and other social niceties are trivialities or worse. What is valued in hyper-assertive cultures are winning and achievement. The ends justify the means when unbalanced Assertiveness drives the culture.

Balancing Your EQ

Too often, emotional intelligence in general—and the EQ-i in particular—are engaged as a score-card in which high scores are good and low scores are bad. This approach is a gross over-simplification behind which too many important EQ lessons are missed and effective EQ development is not done. Effective EQ means you have and know how to achieve balance between these different, and at times conflicting, behaviors.

The act of dialing back or doing less of a behavior is very difficult—if possible at all. The EQ development solution to the balance question is accessing or developing the EQ element that best complements the EQ element you are overdoing—thus achieving EQ balance.



If you over-engage (in frequency, intensity, duration and/or context) Assertiveness, the solution is not to have fewer opinions or drive (be less honest or stalwart), but rather to stand up those EQ elements that would naturally balance your drive toward excessive Assertiveness. The EQ elements that balance Assertiveness are:

- Empathy
- Impulse Control
- Flexibility
- Interpersonal Relationship

Suggested EQ Actions

The following are five suggested actions/exercises, each designed to activate some combination of the above elements with the intended outcome of balancing excessive Assertiveness. Choose 1-2 of these to work on for Overdone Assertiveness:

- Stop in and talk to people—invest time and exhibit concern in them, their interests and their lives. Ask them about themselves, actively listen to their responses, and validate their experience—even if (especially if) you believe or would feel something different. You do not have to agree with someone to honestly affirm his/her experience. “I can see that really upset you.” “I hate it when I feel that way.” “You clearly really enjoyed that.” Remembering details from these exchanges (even if you have to write them down) to follow up on later is a great way to exhibit concern and build a meaningful connection (This is using Interpersonal Relationship and Empathy to balance Assertiveness).
- Before speaking, directing or reacting, discuss your options with a trusted advisor or colleague, asking for your message’s impact. Consider softer and less directive words or tone. Even if alternatives are not forthcoming, the delay will give you time to reflect (This is using Impulse Control to balance Assertiveness).
- On an issue where your opinion is fixed, consider at least two other positions or points of view to the extent that you could argue that side of the argument in a debate. If this kind of brainstorming is difficult for you to do on your own, conduct a brainstorming session with a colleague or work group to generate at least two other options to a problem, conflict or issue. This will generate new data for you to consider and position you as the facilitator of this change (This is using Flexibility to balance Assertiveness).
- In conversation (or in a meeting), ask people their beliefs or opinions, and repeat them back with enough precision (whether you agree with them or not) that the originator of the thought agrees that you got it—content and feeling— accurately. (This is using Empathy to balance Assertiveness).
- In lieu of managing, facilitate a meeting—keep the conversation going, record the ideas and contributions, encourage quiet people to contribute and domineering people to hold back, ask open-ended questions to keep the flow of ideas and data going and DO NOT debate or argue with opinions or decisions with which you disagree (This using Empathy and Flexibility to balance Assertiveness).