

SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

"ASSERTIVENESS — OR TOUGH-MINDEDNESS?"

Guest Commentary
BY JOE D. BATTEN

"I thought that a seminar on assertiveness would give me what I needed . . . It didn't! Then, I read two books on assertiveness, and I got more confused. I didn't know whether to become more self-seeking, abrasive, aggressive, martyred — or what."

"I tried some 'assertive' techniques and almost got fired."

"Assertiveness training was the best thing that ever happened to me."

These are just a few of the many and varied reactions to assertiveness training heard throughout the country.

Before, or even as, assertive training or "AT" assumes faddish dimensions, let's premise what the "seeker of assertiveness" may really want and need. While recognizing the enormous and desirable diversity of people, let us premise that most want the following:

- To be treated fairly
- Equality of opportunity
- Compensation directly related to achievement
- A receptive ear — a "positive" listener
- To keep their dignity intact
- Growing self-confidence — feeling good about themselves
- A feeling of significance as an individual
- A feeling of personality integration or "having it all together"
- Growth as a communicator and as a person
- Clear, realistic verbal ex-



Joe D. Batten

change of expectations

I began several years ago to study key elements of human interaction in the workplace, the community, and the home to develop curricula to meet these needs. I call the result of these experiences and observations "tough-mindedness." To say that "a tough mind and a tender heart are one," oversimplifies, but not as much as it may appear.

Let me list what tough-minded living is *not* and what all too many stereotyped notions of assertiveness would seem to teach:

- The best defense is a good offense

- Become a go-getter (rather than a go-giver)
- Assume that others will exploit you
- Adopt an abrasive, arrogant manner
- Competing with others (rather than one's self)
- Look out for number one

Teaching Assertiveness

Participants in tough-minded training courses are helped by the course leader through various group interaction techniques to realize and experience how strengthening, toughening and non-threatening it is to be vulnerable. This is one of my central tenets. Many books on assertion are saying that to be vulnerable is to be weak.

On the contrary, I believe and have found that the reverse is true. To steadily forge a ring of defenses around your life — your emotions, values, hopes and dreams — is to exclude opportunities to grow. Defensiveness results in atrophy — physical, mental and spiritual. On the other hand, vulnerability opens the door for ongoing growth experience through which we discover new strengths, insights, skills and response-abilities. When we are vulnerable to life's events, even obstacles and seemingly closed doors are experienced as positive opportunities for growth and development.

The late Lillian Gilbreth shared

with me the secret of her success as we chatted on a flight one afternoon: "Every morning I ask the Lord for obstacles and difficulties." At that time in my own growth, I was too immature to comprehend the profundity of what she was saying. I then asked, disappointedly, "Is that all?" She smiled gently and said, "No, every night I thank Him, because He always answers that request." She *knew* the need for a testing, questing and stretching life style through vulnerability and openness.

How it Works

For equality of opportunity to really work and not just be a superficial cosmetic applied to your policies, procedures, practices, processes, programs, and people, it is important to understand the following: Men and women are the same! No, not anatomically, we all know that, but rather the same in terms of a basic profile as human beings — as *people*. Everyone has dreams, hopes, fears, anxieties, triumphs, wants, and needs; we are *people* first and

men and women second.

It becomes crucial, then, that this kind of understanding permeates an awareness of *what* we possess to *assert* . . . Ourselves! And what is our "self" composed of? Our *strengths*!

Judy Porter, my secretary and colleague, says, "Assertion is a true expression of ourselves — our thoughts, feelings and beliefs; it should be delivered in a direct, honest and appropriate manner that encourages assertive behavior of the recipient."

Let's examine and affirm this statement that assertion is a true expression of ourselves. We believe that a person is defined and profiled by his/her strengths — that a *weakness* is simply what is lacking or needs further development. Therefore, let us premise that tough-minded assertion is best defined as "the vulnerable exposition of strengths" and examine how to apply it for vibrant living and working, without abrasiveness or polemics.

Dianne Hockett, another col-

league, once said, "To me real assertive behavior is being open, vulnerable and honest." Regrettably, too many (or so we hear) are being taught to be defensive and self-serving. Outlined in Figure 1 are some specific ways to practice tough-minded assertiveness and what to avoid during various stages of employment.

Figure 1 covers just a few examples of the differences in focus. Basically, assertive training is designed to reverse at least 36 stereotypes from rigid, self-seeking tactics to tough, flexible, open tactics designed to produce positivism, openness, growth, synergistic teamwork and more effective performance as a strong, confident individual.

Results

I have found that this kind of tough-minded training helps the participant to achieve greater personal growth, self-confidence, interpersonal skill and — above all — an increment of hope. I might add that the effect of such attitudinal changes on job productivity

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Figure 1.

THE PRE-EMPLOYMENT INTERVIEW

Stereotyped Assertiveness

"Tell me all about your benefit program."

"What is in it for me?"

Tough-Minded Assertiveness

"I'd like to know what the company's objectives are."

"What do you **expect** from me?"

FIRST DAY ON THE JOB — MEETS NEW SUPERVISOR

Stereotyped Assertiveness

Fight or flight option

Passivity or aggressiveness option

"What should I **do**?"

Anticipates directive management

I'm O.K. — You're not O.K.

"What's the power structure here?"

"I want to learn all the angles."

"Who should I suspect?"

Tough-Minded Assertiveness

Vulnerable, open

"Please let me know how I can grow."

"What should I get **done**?"

Anticipates expective management

I'm O.K. — You're O.K.

"What are the performance standards?"

"What can I help build?"

"Who can I trust?"

DURING A PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

Stereotyped Assertiveness

Dwell on weaknesses

Maintain incident file of grievances

Assess activity

Declarative statements

"I" oriented

What can I get?

Tough-Minded Assertiveness

Build on strengths

Maintain incident file of positive contributions

Assess results

Clear, relevant questions

"We" oriented

What can I give?

IN DAY-TO-DAY OPERATION

Stereotyped Assertiveness

Work the angles

Finger pointing

Be **dissatisfied**

Focuses on "rights"

Beat them to the punch

The boss is exploiting me

Tough-Minded Assertiveness

Play it straight

Look at the three fingers pointing back at you

Be **unsatisfied**

Focuses on "privileges"

They're **right** until proven wrong

I'm here to stretch and contribute

is very positive.

At the heart of everything I have attempted to share, is the importance and need for a *vital and significant concept of self*. The "golden age of Greece" was a direct product of a concept of self which was the wellspring and nourishment of the great intellectual and architectural achievements of that era. They believed that if a person hurts another, they hurt themselves. They believed, further, that if one sought beauty and truth in another, they found these same qualities in themselves. The self was made whole and complete only in caring and synergistic relationships with others.

When that beautiful — and eminently practical — concept of self shrunk back into a narcissistic preoccupation with one's own body, mind, and spirit, the golden age of Greece — the tough-minded sub-

stance — crumbled. Today Madison Avenue is leading Americans down the same primrose path. We are bombarded with commercials saying: "I buy it because I deserve it" (the "ME generation"). We must move beyond a limiting and self-serving concept of assertiveness to a renewing and strengthening commitment to "reach out and build someone" and then we can truly find ourselves. — *Joe D. Batten*

Joe Batten is president, chairman of the board, and chief executive officer of Batten, Batten, Hudson & Swab, Inc., a human resources company engaged in creative management research, film production and educational services. The firm is internationally recognized for innovative programs which help develop people and organizations to their optimum potential. He has written numerous articles for national publications and has appeared on local and network television and radio programs.