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From aggressive to assertive


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Review

From aggressive to assertive[☆]Mary E. Maloney, MD^{a,*}, Patricia Moore, MPA^b^a Department of Dermatology, University of Massachusetts Medical School, Hahnemann Campus, Worcester, MA, United States^b Moore and Associates, Marblehead, MA, USA

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We watched with mounting concern as Serena Williams challenged the chair umpire in the 2018 Women's Final of the U.S. Open this past September. "Stay cool," "Walk away," "Don't get him mad," we said to ourselves and the television. But she did not take our advice. She firmly disputed the warning that she was being coached from the sidelines, which is a violation women get called for more than men in tournaments (Clarey, 2018). Soon after, she broke her racquet in frustration at missing a point, for which she was then penalized a point. She vigorously challenged that penalty, accusing the umpire of "stealing" from her and treating her differently than men. For that, she was penalized a game, which is a rarity in Grand Slam matches. Serena lost the match, later dissolving into tears.

Outrage followed, and not just from women. The crowd at the U.S. Open booed the officials. Billie Jean King and others took to the airwaves and social media to call the umpire sexist (Raggs and Boren, 2018). Even tennis "bad boys" John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors agreed that the umpire behaved in a sexist way toward Serena. They reminded us that they name-called, broke racquets,

and even swore at tennis officials during matches and, while sometimes fined, they were never docked a whole game (Cancian, 2019). The chair umpire and other U.S. Tennis officials stood by the decision to go by the book.

Whether you take Serena's side or the umpire's side, this incident kicked into the open a conversation about how men are rewarded and women are punished when demonstrating the exact same behavior, especially at work. Aggressive behavior in men is seen as decisive, forceful, ambitious, and leader-like; it is often commended and even rewarded. Aggressive behavior in women is seen as hysterical, domineering, bitchy, and certainly not rewarded. Even assertive behavior in women is misunderstood to be aggressive. Both conscious and unconscious or implicit bias are at play (Zheng et al., 2018). Although individual men are not responsible for these inequities, we all (men included) need to work to change our culture.

Let's agree that this double standard is unfair, and our workplaces need massive cultural change. This article is about how women can navigate through this double standard and still stand up for themselves.

A range of communication style behaviors have been labeled over time, including passive, assertive, and aggressive behaviors. Although there are value judgements associated with these (e.g., passive = weak), in fact using elements of all three behaviors is

[☆] No human subjects were included in this study. No animals were used in this study

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quite common and demonstrates a flexibility of styles and behaviors.

Passive behavior is behavior that accepts events or the actions of others without resistance. Some synonyms include submissive, yielding, obedient, meek, subdued, and deferential. Not many people would argue against passive being equated to weak. On the other hand, in situations in which one has little investment or interest, one might choose to be a passive observer. However, if this is someone's main style, that individual will be seen as shy and ineffective.

Aggressive seems to have two definitions. The first is "ready or likely to attack or confront," with synonyms including hostile, antagonistic, or belligerent. An alternate definition is "pursuing one's aims and interests forcefully, sometimes unduly," with synonyms including assertive, forceful, vigorous, energetic, bold, or enterprising ([Oxford Dictionaries, 2019](#)). The first definition is clearly negative, but the second sounds more active than threatening. Male aggressive behavior seems more acceptable (definition 2), whereas women seem to be labeled with the more negative "bitchy" reputation (definition 1).

Lastly, assertive is defined as showing confidence and standing up for one's personal rights in a direct and honest way. Synonyms include self-confident, positive, self-assured, firm, and determined. Who would not like to have a reputation of being assertive and self-confident?

Incorporating these styles and flexing them when appropriate is both a challenge and an opportunity for women. Wanting to change both the workplace and the world at large is enticing, yet changes are exceedingly slow. In this article, we discuss strategies for managing this double bind.

First, start with becoming more emotionally intelligent. Emotional intelligence is the ability to understand and manage one's own emotions and to influence the emotions of others ([Goleman, 1995](#)). Begin by working on "me" first.

Self-awareness

Become more self-aware. Take a communication assessment to measure how you prefer to behave and communicate. A number of such assessments are available, including the DISC Behavior Assessment to characterize your strengths, challenges, and communication styles; this assessment also offers insights for communicating with others ([TTI Success Insights, 2019](#)). This needs to be done with someone who is familiar with the product, but DISC is an excellent tool and well worth the time at a small expense.

The PACE Color Palette can be found online and is simpler but provides less information. PACE is a great tool for a group to use together to understand themselves and the group dynamics ([The PACE Organization, 2019](#)). The Myers-Briggs assessment tool is a data-heavy product that provides much information, but it needs someone with skills to help interpret and apply the information to your group interactions ([Myers-Briggs, 2019](#)). This sample of tools is very representative of the types of products available.

Assessments like these help identify your style of communication and highlight both the strengths and limitations of that style. You can learn whether you are a direct or indirect communicator, more introverted or extroverted, and more task- or people-oriented. There are also wellness questionnaires, assessments of what motivates and drives you to be successful, and tools to assess leadership skills and gaps.

Get feedback

Seek feedback from mentors or coaches. Mentors are individuals, usually in your field, who can help develop your career, assist in networking, and provide valuable feedback. In today's world,

you can expect to have multiple mentors throughout your career. Coaches, on the other hand, are paid professionals, hired for a shorter term, who focus on performance and help you get better at aspects of your job. Coaches can help you assess your strengths and challenges and provide helpful insights into what motivates you; they will work with you to flex your communication and behavior at work.

You can also learn about yourself and your communication style by noticing how people respond to you. If you think you are not being heard or taken seriously or if you see coworkers shrinking away from you, ask someone you trust to give you feedback on how you are coming across at work. This can be hard because it is not easy to ask for feedback nor is it easy to give it. Make it easier by saying something like "I find I'm not getting my point across during the meeting, and I'd like to get your thoughts about that and what I could do differently. Could we find a few minutes to talk this week?" Then listen carefully and openly to what the other person has to say. If the feedback is vague, probe for specific examples in a nondefensive way. Asking for feedback from a trusted friend or colleague is a sign of strength, not weakness, and you need to be open and not defensive to get the most from such feedback (and to have your trusted friend be willing to offer such feedback again).

Manage your hot buttons

A key component of emotional intelligence is self-regulation of one's emotions, particularly your "hot buttons." Hot buttons are the triggers that set you off, taking you from calm to crazed. In this crazed state, you lose rational thought and lash out. Each of us has hot buttons, often stemming from past experiences. Examples include a child dropping his or her coat on the floor, coworkers leaving early and expecting you to do their work, or a leader who dismisses your comments or credits your good ideas or hard work to others.

Understanding the physiologic basis of these reactions is helpful. The brain has three components: the amygdala (reptilian complex), which controls breathing, heart rate, and flight/fight responses, is the amygdala; the limbic system controls emotions and values; and the neocortex is responsible for thinking, logic, and planning. For example, when you see a snake, the signal goes to the amygdala in 12 milliseconds. Your heart rate and blood pressure increase, respirations are shallow, muscle tone is increased, pupils dilate, your mouth is dry, and you have laser-like focus (blocking out other things going on around you). At 24 milliseconds, the signal reaches your neocortex, but your fight/flight reaction has already shunted blood from the neocortex to the amygdala, so while your muscles are revving up, the thinking brain becomes disabled. You run, not thinking about direction or consequences.

Change the setting: You are in a meeting, and someone triggers that button with a comment or attack. You fight, but without the assistance of your neocortex. You might yell, throw something, or say something you do not mean. Congratulations, you now have a reputation of aggressiveness, bitchiness, or instability. You later apologize, but recovering trust or reputation may take months, assuming that another hot button is not pushed after the first incident. And yes, men are forgiven for this behavior as being passion when women are not.

Combating this amygdala hijack ([Goleman, 1995](#)) takes self-awareness and control and a few strategies. These hot buttons trigger bad feelings that are essentially perceived threats, so what can you do? Develop cooling strategies that may include having someone who can signal to you that you are heating up, pausing and breathing, and actively disengaging by walking away or taking time to visualize a calm or safe space. Strangely, the simple act of smiling may help end the hijack; if you cannot smile, putting a

pencil between your teeth to move the same muscle may work well. Distract yourself or name the emotion that is surging through you. Do almost anything that gives the reasoning portion of your brain time to get in the game. Then, when you are back in control, reexamine the situation, learn from your reaction, and learn how to get the self-awareness that prevents you from seeing red. Your reputation will love you for this proactive behavior.

Presence and body language

So much goes into the perception of who you are and what your message is. Beyond looking neat and clean, attire is not addressed in the literature. White coats with name badges set a professional tone, but they must be clean and crisp. As important or more important are other components, including posture, eye contact, and hand gestures. Assertive features of posture include a relaxed stance, even with hands in pockets. When sitting in a meeting, sitting straight and leaning slightly forward indicate engagement. Hand gestures that are appropriate for the conversation are conservative and do not include pointing or jabbing. In today's era, touching is usually not recommended, but a light touch on someone's shoulder is sometimes not inappropriate.

In contrast, aggressive behavior includes pacing, invading others' personal space either when sitting or standing, having arms crossed, making large gestures, and pointing or stabbing a finger in someone's direction. Aggressive approaches also include hearty back slapping or a crushing, painful hand shake.

Eye contact is always important to indicate that attention is being paid to whatever is occurring, but staring is very aggressive and looking away sends a passive or uninterested message.

Pay attention to your body language. You can control it, and it does send a very strong message in meetings large and small.

Talking/engagement

There is very interesting data on talking and perception (Brescoll, 2011). People who speak more in meetings are those who see themselves in power. Men who speak more are seen as more powerful or contributing more, whereas women who speak more may have their reputation diminished. Another double standard to be sure. Women tend to be better listeners, so when occupying positions of authority, they will be perceived in a more positive light if they do listen as well as speak.

Work the room; understand others

Now that you have identified your own communication style and discovered your hot buttons and how to manage them, work on the other component of emotional intelligence: influencing the emotions of others. Start by figuring out the communication styles and preferences of those around you. Do they have a direct or indirect communication style? Introverted or extroverted? Focused more on the task at hand or the people involved? Do some want to get right to the topic at hand or chat about the weekend or the weather before getting down to business? Watch for body language and nonverbal clues. You will be most successful in your communication with someone of a different style if you adapt by using more of their style and less of your own. This is what is meant by flexing your communication style.

You might wonder why you should adapt your communication style to someone else's; perhaps it sounds like suggesting you become another person and not yourself. Think about what your goal is for the relationship or the conversation. Is it getting work done, building relationships, or both? In health care today, research shows that the quality of our relationships with col-

leagues is directly linked to positive patient outcomes. When you flex your style, you are really working to build relationships; rest assured, building relationships is like putting money in the bank. When you build relationships of trust in both directions, you find that people you had difficulty with suddenly have attributes you can respect and talents you can count on. These relationships serve as a buffer to burnout as well.

Too aggressive?

If you have learned that you are coming on too strong and that your behavior may be too aggressive for your work environment, try some different strategies. Listen actively. Give your full attention to those speaking: Turn away from the computer and move to a table rather than a desk, do not answer your phone, and do not multitask. Ask open-ended questions, clarify, and summarize. Acknowledge your colleagues' point of view. Acknowledgement is not acceptance, but it is an affirmation that your colleague has been heard.

Stay calm and keep your tone of voice measured. Aggressive (and highly assertive) people are usually competitive and want to win. They are energized by rapid, back-and-forth discussions. Your colleagues may shrink from this type of conversation, and may not perform at their best when placed in this situation.

Below is a cheat sheet of tips to use to modify or flex your communication from aggressive to assertive and from passive to assertive:

1. Know your triggers and manage them.
2. Get someone you trust to help you with triggers.
3. Never speak, call, send e-mails, or make social media posts when you are angry.
4. Take an assessment to know your style and your values.
5. Have a mentor.
6. Consider a coach.
7. Be aware of your body language:
 - a. Balance your facial expressions and avoid grim or angry expressions.
 - b. Make eye contact, but do not stare.
 - c. Have a relaxed posture.
 - d. Make appropriate gestures.
8. Stay engaged in the moment and listen.
9. Give credit whenever possible and share credit generously.
10. Find something to agree with.
11. Ask "What are your thoughts?"
12. the other person's point of view; say, "I hear you."
13. Remember, it is okay to say "I disagree." You can phrase disagreement as agreement: "Fred, I agree this is a serious issue, but I have another approach to solving the problem." That first agreement makes Fred feel heard while you guide the conversation in a completely different direction.
14. Frame your comments; give notice that you have a firm opinion. For example, "Because I feel strongly that this is an ethical issue, I'm going to speak very directly."

Not assertive enough?

If you think you are not assertive enough to be heard or effective in your workplace, you are probably a very good listener, waiting for others to finish what they have to say before speaking yourself. You sometimes find that the meeting ends before you can get your views on the table. Here are a few things to try to improve your assertiveness:

1. Listen actively.
2. Before a meeting ends, find a way to get your views on the table.
3. Plan ahead for an important meeting:
 - a. Try "I have a comment on this topic."

4. Do not use apologetic statements like “I’m sorry to bother you” or “This may sound crazy.”
5. Do not “uptalk,” or raise your voice at the end of sentences as if every statement is a question.
6. Be aware of your body language, your voice, and your word choices:
 - a. Make more eye contact, and make it clear you are listening fully.
 - b. Make eye contact with everyone in the room when you are speaking up in a meeting.
 - c. Sit or stand straight; do not shrink or curl up defensively.

We began this article by acknowledging that the bias against assertive behavior by women in the workplace results in an unfair double standard. We hope we have given tips to become more emotionally intelligent in order to be effective and have influence in your professional lives. At the same time, we know from our own experiences that unpopular decisions need to be made. You may need to act quickly and decisively because a situation requires it and you have no time to hear out the opinions of others. With a smile and a measured tone of voice, your more aggressive behavior may well be perceived as assertive. Persist in acting collaboratively and never hiding your knowledge, using your skills in communication to own the situation.

On Saturday, July 14, 2019, Serena Williams unexpectedly lost the Women’s Final match at Wimbledon to an opponent she had beat nine out of the last 10 times they played against each other. At her postmatch press conference, Serena was asked how she would respond to comments that she would play better if she stopped fighting for equality and focused more on tennis. She took a breath and with a wry smile said, “The day I stop fighting for equality... is the day I’ll be in my grave.” The press called it a mic-drop moment.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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NA.

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