



WORDWISE COACHING PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT – SERIES 1 EPISODE 8
Assertiveness with Deborah Dalley

Rachel:

Hello, and welcome to the Wordwise Coaching Podcast. I'm Rachel Goodwin, an executive coach, and for this series I've chosen some of the most common areas I focus on with clients and have invited fellow coaches and experts to explore with me. In our work with clients, we aim to help them improve their performance in the workplace. It's really rewarding to see the difference coaching can make and we're now excited about reaching a wider audience, sharing our experience and advice and hearing your thoughts. So please do subscribe at www.wordwisecoaching.co.uk, and we can then share any materials or suggested reading around today's podcast and our top tips summary. By subscribing you can be sure you'll never miss an episode and we can update you about events and new resources. You can even give us ideas for future episodes. Today, I'm joined by Deborah Dalley. Deborah is an assertiveness expert. She's been delivering assertiveness communication workshops for over 25 years in the public, private and voluntary sectors. She also coaches individuals and facilitates team events that specialise in helping people successfully deal with difficult situations. She's author of the book, *Developing your Assertiveness Skills*, which is one of the core texts I use on the Talented Women's Impact Programme.

Deborah:

And I think we have to be careful not to assume intent about other people's behavior,

Rachel:

It could be very difficult to think on your feet, but you can revisit quite a lot of the time.

Deborah:

I really don't believe most managers and leaders go home at night thinking, what can I do to really upset them tomorrow?

Rachel:

If you just think, oh, fingers crossed, I've got a few new words. I'll give it a whirl.

Deborah:

Yeah.

Rachel:

May be not be quite so successful.

Rachel:

I'm just so excited to be talking to you today, Deborah, because I use your book all the time, recommend it all over the place. And so to be able to explore this with you is a real treat.





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Deborah:

Well, thank you. And thank you very much for the invitation.

Rachel:

I just find this is a topic that helps clients so much in such a variety of ways and I found it terrifically, helpful myself in life and work, et cetera. So I think it's really rich and I'm looking forward to what we get out of the conversation and I'm sure listeners will find it incredibly helpful. To kick off it would be good to hear what brought you to assertiveness and why you find it such a useful model?

Deborah:

OK. To be honest, I started working with it probably about 30 years ago when I worked for Greater Manchester Police. And I think that was the first time that the whole premise of if we alter our behavior, we might alter the outcome of the situation. And I think it was the first time that really dawned on me that behavior breeds behavior and, not surprisingly in the police force, that's quite important and quite pertinent. And so we started to do a huge amount of work on the difference between aggression and assertion and what a fine line that was and how offices that managed to handle things more assertively tended to get better outcomes. So my interest started there and that's, I did a lot of work there for 10, 15 years, but very much like you, I have found since then in my coaching practice in leadership and, and management programs that I run, it's a core, a core area. And I think I'd always assumed that the more senior people became that they've nailed this and that the truth is they haven't, it's something we all struggle with, but in different areas and at different times.

Rachel:

And I think that point about the assumption that if somebody's very senior, that they've got this all sorted, I had exactly that same assumption. And yet the thing about assertiveness is it's bizarre because it's incredibly simple in one regard, but complicated to really apply successfully. So those two angles are really, really interesting. Why do you think that is? Why is being assertive challenging?

Deborah:

Yeah, I mean, it's a good question. And one you've probably worked with, with clients over the years and, and I have so much, and I, I think there are two core reasons why it's so challenging. One is that we have so many mind tapes running all the time and I don't want to generalise at all, but I do quite often find this on programs that are targeted at women, that good behavior is being polite, is being respectful, is being seen and not heard, is putting up with things, is just behaving in what people will describe as well and when you say, what does well look like? Well is anonymous, don't make a fuss, don't get in the way. So I think, and I think there are similar mind tapes running for everybody. This is not just a female thing. And I think the other thing that a lot of people struggle with and I suppose, and what I'm sure we'll come back to this, the whole issue of confidence and wanting to be liked. Yes. And, and what if I upset somebody? What if they don't like what I'm saying? And I think I'd be interested to hear your experience, but I think for me, those are the two core things that make it difficult for people.

Rachel:

I think that's absolutely right. And I think it's about, we set, settle into habits. Don't we in life generally, and we settle into communication habits and often there's a reason because they do serve us well in



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some regard, but we get stuck in those habits. And then it feels like there aren't options and it's difficult to break them. And very much the way I work with assertiveness is it's about offering people a choice and being able to think, okay, well normally I do that, but in some situations that's really not working and so how could I tweak it and try something different? And what's interesting is when clients do that initially, I think even though from the outside, it looks like quite a small shift they've made, they haven't turned into somebody else, to them it feels really radical

Deborah:

Because as you say, it's stepping outside our comfort zone and, and the minute we do that by definition, it isn't comfortable.

Rachel:

Yes. And also it takes a conscious effort to think, no, I'm gonna phrase this in a slightly different way, or I'm going to use slightly different language here.

Deborah:

I think arguably there's even a step before that actually recognising the pattern. And I find very often people haven't even questioned the pattern.

Rachel:

And what I like in the book is often I'll ask people to complete the questionnaire that you've got in there, and that just begins to open their eyes to how they normally react to things. And that potentially there may be different ways of reacting to those situations. And that can be a good way of just beginning to start the thinking and them with these different ways of operating. So that's a, a useful first step. And I suppose really we ought to then look at the model itself and what the assertiveness model is and what the different modes of communication and behavior there are within it. So would you like to just talk us through those different modes?

Deborah:

Okay. For, you know, for, so simplicity, lots of people split behavior into three broad category types and they tend to talk about aggressive behavior submissive behavior, which can also be referred to as passive or non assertive and assertive behavior. And I think those definitions have been around for years, but in the work that I've done, I've separated aggression into high level aggression and low level aggression because I think actually they're quite different things. And I think high level aggression, most of us recognise if someone shouts at you, if someone is very rude or swears or becomes very close to you or finger pointing, I think we recognise that is high level aggression and something I realise quite early on in my journey in this was actually, I dealt with that quite well. I don't really lose my temper. So if someone else does, I sort of find myself thinking, gosh, you've got it a bit of a knot, but I thought, but there's a whole raft of behavior that I know I don't handle very well.

Deborah:

And I actually realised that that was low level aggression and low level aggression for me is where people use more manipulative techniques to get what they want. So they're very clear about what they want and they're not really concerned about whether you want to do it or not, but if I can use this



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technique, I might get you to do them. And I think that ranges from things like sarcasm, belittling behavior, silence for me is a form of low level aggression. If someone will just not engage and even excessive flattery, when somebody says to you, oh, please, please, please, please, will you do this because you are the only one who can do it and I really left it too late and that's really difficult to say no to and so for me becomes a form of aggression

Rachel:

That is so true, that low level aggression or passive aggression is manipulative. And the difficulty is if you call it out, it's quite easy for the person to say, oh, I didn't mean that or no, I didn't to say I wouldn't do it, or, oh, no, you've misunderstood what I was saying. So it can be highly manipulative. Can't it?

Deborah:

That is really interesting because, to be honest, I wouldn't call it out because I don't often think it's done with an intent just as we were talking about before. I think it's almost learned behavior. This is how I've got things done before. And so in many ways, I think it is just about thinking if they'd stood there and shouted at me, how would I have responded? So it it's recognising that it is a form of aggression, but not blaming the person for doing that, but finding a way to respond to it.

Rachel:

I think that is a very, very interesting point because I think you're absolutely right, it's an instinctive kind of reaction, not necessarily thought through, not that aggression is necessarily thought through. And I suppose the point about all of these behaviors is they are absolutely driven by emotion aren't they, they're reactions. They're not considered responses

Deborah:

Again. I think they can be either. Sometimes they're reactive. Some people have carved very good careers on shouting at people defining good, and we may not see it as that, but very successful careers by being, you only have to watch something like Succession, which is a very big, you may have seen it and it's seen as a strength. It, you know, very bullish, very dogmatic. And yet we would probably describe that as aggressive behavior, but they're doing it intentionally. Yeah. So, so I think it can be either. I think for me, the really key point in here is we can't change anyone else's behavior. So we spend a lot of time saying, well, they shouldn't have done it. And it's like, well, they have. so let's work on how you would like to deal with that next time, because in changing your behavior, you may impact this.

Deborah:

So I guess that's where I come from with that one. So just going back to behavior types, submissive behavior or passive behavior for me is any behavior where we don't say what we wanted to say, or we walk away and think, why didn't I say anything? So it isn't agreeing or backing down because sometimes you may have made a very conscious decision to do that. You know, I think we've all had days where we think I'm not in the mood for this and I choose not to engage and that's not necessarily submissive. That might be perfectly assertive behavior. For me. I think submissive behavior is when afterwards or at the time we don't feel able to speak or to challenge or to, to comment. And so assertive behavior is that bit in the middle. And, and I think people confuse assertion and aggression because they believe a assertive is about getting your own way. And for me it isn't, it's about feeling that you have the confidence and



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the right to state your view in an appropriate way, equally respect the rights of the other person, not to agree with you. But I think a lot of assertiveness is about compromise. Let's find something that we both can live with and both feel reasonably comfortable with.

Rachel:

And if you are able to do that, you are able to have a reasonable conversation aren't you, that both parties can feel understood. And it's not always possible to get to the perfect solution where everybody walks away thinking that's wonderful, but both parties have been heard.

Deborah:

Yes. And I think that is so important in all of this. And you know, very often I know over the whole of my life, there are many times where I've actually managed to be quite assertive and it hasn't worked, hasn't made any difference, but at least you walk away thinking I did as much as I could do. I can't make somebody think something different. I can't change the strategy of the organisation. However, I did do as much as was in my circle of influence to do.

Rachel:

I think that is so important because in any situation, if you feel like you've been heard, you've communicated effectively, then you do walk away feeling satisfied. Whereas if you don't manage to do that, you can feel that you had no choice. And then it does set in that pattern of behavior that you have a limited amount of control and that that's not a great way to live your life really.

Deborah:

No, I agree. I think it's like anything in life actually, where we feel we've exerted all the influence that we have available to us, then we feel reasonably comfortable in ourselves that we've done everything we can do. But when you think I didn't challenge it, I didn't even tell people that I wasn't happy about it and the awful thing is then things just continue to happen. And the longer they've happened for the harder then is to break into the cycle. And I remember so clearly a, a very senior leader quite a few years ago, coming to his coaching session and I said, what are we working on today? And he said, how to tell my partner that I don't want to go to the in-laws for Christmas. I said, OK. He said, then we'll move on to the restructure and the things that we...., he said, this is really playing on my mind.

Deborah:

and I just want spend the first 10 minutes working out what I'm gonna say. So I said, okay, just out of interest, how long have you been going to your in-laws for Christmas? And he said, 17 years. So I said, have you ever said anything? No. And you, yep, that's now a difficult conversation.

Rachel:

Yeah. Yeah.

Deborah:

Because for 17 years you have allowed a pattern of behavior to carry on without ever saying it might be nice to do something else. And yet year one or year two, wouldn't not have been that big a deal to say, I





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love going to your parents, but it would be really nice next year if we could. But by the time we've let something run for years and years and years, it does become harder to be assertive about it. And also people will say, why did you never say anything? Well,

Rachel:

Well this is the problem. I think often there is this assumption that surely they'll see, surely it will become apparent and often it, it is that point where you say to clients, well, if you don't say anything, how are they going to know? And the frustration of, well, isn't it obvious? And well, of course this isn't fair and you just can't make that assumption and expect that people are going to suddenly wake up one morning and think, oh, maybe he doesn't like going there for Christmas.

Deborah:

Right.

Rachel:

I mean, that is such a classic example, 'cause I think Christmas just throws up so many issues where assertiveness could be incredibly helpful.

Deborah:

Yes. You know, a classic example. And again, you may have come across this, people asking to borrow things and somebody's saying, you know, and I lent it to them and now they haven't given it back and then they gave it back and it was a bit damaged. And now they've asked to borrow it. well they shouldn't have asked should they? It's not right that they should go and buy their own. And then just working with somebody to say, okay, so if you didn't want to lend it, what could you have said at the point at which they first asked? And I think it's that just not allowing some of these patterns to develop

Rachel:

Yes, exactly. Easy

Deborah:

To say, much harder to do.

Rachel:

Well, it's so easy when you are sitting on the outside of a situation and you don't have the emotional involvement to say, oh, well you need to point this out or say this. Not always so simple in real life. I think a classic example clients often come with and I was speaking to somebody yesterday about this is workload. I'm constantly being asked to do more. I'm working really long hours, the timelines are completely unrealistic and people get more and more worn down. They look more exhausted. They're even less able to cope with the workload they've got. And it feels like there's no way out of it. And often, yesterday with this client, we talked about being very clear about if this is what you want, this is the resource that we need. So just being very matter of fact about it. But I think when people are so worn down and they feel like they've been abused, even they are waiting for the other party to see that they can't cope or that there's too much for them to do. And people are so busy now that they're not aware



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of everybody's workload and unless you absolutely bring it to them in a very clear way, then they're not going to say, oh, why don't you recruit two more people or it, it may happen, but it's unlikely and waiting for it to happen is not a good strategy.

Deborah:

And I think we have to be careful not to assume intent about other people's behavior. I really don't believe most managers and leaders go home at night thinking what can I do to really upset them tomorrow? You know that that's not how people are operating. And, and so yeah, I really agree with you about that one. I think we care more about those things and therefore it's really important we find a way to express them. I mean the, the workload one is a, an interesting one and I think it is very much about getting people to think about, well, what have I got to do? Why do I believe that this is difficult? And therefore here's my list. What shall I drop? Yes, yes. You know, I'm really happy to do this. And I, and one of the things when people talk about saying no, I'll often say, think about what you can say yes to.

Rachel:

Yes. Yeah.

Deborah:

So to say, yes, I'm really happy to take that project on. However, if I do, something on this list will have to go. So you'll either need to find someone else to do something or because I can do one or the other, I can't do all of it.

Rachel:

And then it enables everybody to look at it together to come up with a practical solution or to say, oh, well then we can't really give you that project because it does mean that you're not going to be able to do the work that we absolutely need you to do, but it's about raising it. I think people are often so keen to kind of show willing and to lean into new opportunities or to help out if there's short staff but at the end of the day, if you make yourself ill in the process, that's no help to anybody. And, and as you say, it's not the intent. It's not what people are aiming for, but it's about taking responsibility for your own capacity and being able to express it in a way that is helpful and respectful but is going to mean that all the work can get done.

Deborah:

Yeah. I would completely agree.

Rachel:

Deborah, can you tell us what role rights play in assertiveness?

Deborah:

Yeah, I think for me, this is the underlying premise of assertiveness is that it is about our rights as humans as, as individuals. So these are not legal rights, but these are the things that we believe we have





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the right to express an opinion to express a view, to be listened to in many ways. They're very similar to a lot of people's personal values. These are things that I believe are part of my right as a, as a human being. However, if we, we are going to exercise those rights, we absolutely have to recognise that other people have them as well. So if I feel it's okay to tell you what I think or what I feel, I have to be willing to listen to you and to accept that you may not see it in the same way. And so I think rights are fundamental to this.

Deborah:

And interestingly, I quite often find that people are more comfortable exercising rights for other people than they are for themselves. So, you know, a classic example is probably their children. So people will say, you know, well, if my child was being bullied at school or was being treated unfairly, I would go in and I would deal with that. And they would, and they would go and talk to the headmistress or the headmaster. And, and yet they may well be experiencing a very similar thing at work where they're being treated unfairly or badly and they find it very difficult to stand up for themselves.

Rachel:

I think that's so interesting 'cause often I think often, if a client comes to you and starts talking about a situation where you really feel that somebody isn't respecting their rights and they hear themselves telling you about it, you can almost see them be coming to the realisation - actually that's not acceptable. And it only takes a gentle acknowledgement and some questioning around it in coaching for them to really see no, this isn't right, but they have lived with it and it's just been probably going on for quite a while and they've got used to it.

Deborah:

And I think it's really interesting when you say to somebody, okay, if you'd heard your closest friend say that to you, what would you be saying? And you know, they're very quick to say, well, I'd say it's probably not acceptable actually.

Rachel:

Yeah.

Deborah:

And so I think it, for me, it comes down to four key things. Firstly, we have to believe we have the right and you know, there are some situations in which I might think, I'm not sure I do have the right to tell you what I think or feel here. I don't know you and so I can't walk up to you in the middle of Asda and tell you I don't like what you're wearing. That's really not something I have the right to do or the desire I hasten to add, but firstly, we have to believe we have the right.

Deborah:

Secondly, we have to have the confidence to assert it and I mean, it's probably a whole other podcast, a whole area, but I think confidence is really key.. In, in this and for a lot of people, what stops them is they know what they want to do, they know what they think they ought to do, but they just don't have





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the confidence to do it. I think if they do have the confidence it's then about what's the right way to do it, what's the most respectful way, what language are you gonna use? All of those kind of things and then finally, are you willing to respect the rights of other people? So whatever it is you are going to say, are you willing to hear either the same thing back or something that doesn't agree with your mode of thinking,

Rachel:

I really like that framework. It's so clear and absolutely true. And on the confidence piece, I think that coaching can play a big part there. In that being able to support somebody and explore it and really understand what's underlying their reluctance or their hesitance to recognise their own rights. There's often a lot of work that needs to be done there and it can be done in a variety of formats, but getting some external help around that can really make a massive difference I think

Deborah:

I completely agree. And I know it's an old text now and I know it isn't loved by everybody, but I still, for me *Feel The Fear and Do It Anyway*, that old faithful book of Susan Jeffers, just, I think that principle of, if I shine a light on the fear, if I actually think, what is it about that happening that I don't believe I can handle. And as soon as we start to work that out, then it becomes easier to think, so what would help you to handle it?

Rachel:

Yes. So often it is about, as you say, recognising it and being able to sit with it, being able to acknowledge it and then you can actually do something about it. But as with any kind of discomfort, the human tendency is to move away from it isn't it. And being able to sit with it and work through it isn't always easy.

Deborah:

No, but I think we often don't break it down. We just allow it to stay in the shadows as just this fear and I think for me, that was the, the work after reading that book that I just thought, yeah, actually just shine a big light on it. What are you actually fearful of? And just to give you a, a small example, I'll try and keep it short but many years ago, when I first set up the business, I was invited to Ireland to talk to a group of GPS about Emotional Intelligence and in a moment of high confidence, I said, yes. And in the middle of the night I woke up thinking, well, obviously I can't go because they're GPS they'll know way more about this than me. I don't even know how to get to Ireland. And, and I even remember lying there thinking

Deborah:

I just had my third child and I thought, and I've got nothing to wear. So it's simple. I can't go. And I actually had a coaching session the following day and I said, okay, what we're working on today is how I get out of this without damaging my reputation. So I'm willing to break a leg, I'm willing to do whatever it takes, but I'm not going. And she said, okay, that's fine so can we just list all the reasons that you're not going? She then started to go through them one at a time saying, okay so just if you were, how could you work out how to get to Ireland? And obviously I could look up some and, and as I say, I won't go through the whole thing, but by the time we'd gone through them, all she said, okay, so what are you





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gonna say to get out of this? And I thought, do you know what I can do it. And by not actually just trying to talk me out of how I felt by actually exploring what I felt, we came to a really different place.

Rachel:

It is amazing, isn't it? Because we can jump to solutions that just make us feel a bit more comfortable can't we? And, and to have somebody to sort of say, no, let's just gently take a little look and see what's going on behind this. You can come to a very different place. And obviously the GP talk will have gone brilliantly and you would've been very pleased you did it no doubt.

Deborah:

Certainly went way better than I expected. I learned a huge amount from doing it and I agree with you, I know that I would've always felt it would've just been one of those other things that went into that bank of things that I didn't do.

Rachel:

Yes.

Deborah:

And I don't often think we regret the things we do do. No, I think we regret the things we don't do.

Rachel:

I think that is absolutely so true. Also, if you do that once and you realise what's gone on, you're more likely then to repeat that exercise potentially with someone else, but then you get into the habit of doing it yourself.

Deborah:

No, you're right, I do it all the time. You know, I just get a big bit of paper and it's like, OK, just write it all down. What's getting in the way, where's this interference coming from and then yeah work through it bit by bit. So I think breaking things down for me is a really important part of confidence.

Rachel:

Yes, absolutely and there's also, there's a, a mind practice that I came across that I was very surprised how powerful it was. It's often those simple things and it was really trying to identify the specific emotion you were feeling. So, you know, sometimes you can just feel like I just feel rotten. I just feel really awful and it could have been triggered by some specific event, but then if you really make yourself think, what am I feeling? And I was surprised the first time I did it. I was really surprised 'cause I was actually angry and I would never have said I was angry. And I think I probably feel quite uncomfortable with anger, but to be able to really identify that did mean it also, it takes the sting out of it. If you're kind of going in there and just examining it, it doesn't feel as dangerous or overwhelming. So just coming back to assertiveness communication and behavior, what would you describe are the kind of characteristics? How do you recognise it when you, you see it?





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Deborah:

I suppose the simplest way to think about that is it does come back to the three core things that we use to communicate, the words that we use, the tone of voice that we use and what we're doing with our bodies. And if those three are all in tune, then we behave congruently. And I think it's good that you've asked that because something I often find is people will say yes, but I said this and the words were perfectly assertive, but then what they'd done was accompanied it with a I, I wanted to ask whether there was, whether it be okay if I took Wednesday off and it's been delivered in a way that sort of says, I don't actually believe you're gonna say yes. And, and please you might as well say on the end and please do say if it's a problem you know.

Deborah:

And so it isn't just about the words. And I think we spend a lot of time working on the words and not enough time on the delivery. And something, I, every time someone says to me in the coaching session, yes right. I'm gonna go and have a word with them and I'll say, okay, tell me what you're gonna say. Imagine I'm them and say it to me. And people just completely undermine their message by, as I say, either their tone of voice and also the other way around some people are very direct and it can actually sound quite aggressive when there is no intention for it to be, but it feels aggressive. And so I think hearing yourself say it out loud, having someone else there to give you some feedback on that can be really helpful.

Rachel:

I will often role play with a client and it is amazing that it's the same with anything. Isn't it. If you're trying something new, you tend to maybe go to another extreme potentially, and then you just have to kind of dial it back, but you need to play with it and you need to have practised it. And you need to have almost had that physical sensation of hearing yourself, seeing yourself and just that slight shift is so powerful. But if you just think, oh, fingers crossed, I've got a few new words, I'll give it a whirl.

Deborah:

Yeah.

Rachel:

Maybe not be quite so successful.

Deborah:

And I think one of the most powerful things we can and do in trying to develop this is not to beat ourselves up when something doesn't go in the way that we hoped it would, but to use that reflective time in thinking if I faced that situation again, what would I like to have said? You know, and the car, the shower, are really, really good places to hear yourself say that. And I completely agree with you that if we've heard ourselves say it out loud, we are more likely to be able to replicate that. Yes. And you know, this isn't just in, in conversation, I work a lot in universities and anyone that's giving big conference papers or present so many people will say, I learn the first two minutes.





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Deborah:

You know, and I learn it and I hear myself say it and I say it in the way that I want to say it. And I know if I start well then my confidence will follow.

Rachel:

I think you're so right. I will nearly always say to clients, make sure that you are really confident about the start. It's not about learning massive long scripts with these conversations or anything else. But if you start well and you hear yourself and you think, yeah, that is the person I want to be then it's far easier to continue in that vein and to put the effort in with that start is really, really important.

Deborah:

And I think in, in what we're talking about in more general conversation, there used to be somebody. when I worked at the police who whenever I contributed, he would say something along the lines of, well, you would say that, cause you're a woman. This was many years ago. And, and, and he thought it was funny. And lot of other people would laugh and every time for so many meetings, I'd let it go. Because I think, I dunno what to say. And so every time I'd come out and I'd think what could I say? And in the end I found something I felt comfortable with and I can't remember exactly what it was, but it was something like, I'm not sure I can't speak for all women but I can tell you that that's what I think. And once I got that and once I practised it and said it out loud, and I remember vividly the first meeting that I actually managed to say it, and I felt so good. And everyone was out like, oh yeah, that's a good point. Actually. I don't think we can just generalise can we? And I thought, why didn't I do that six months ago? Because I hadn't worked it out.

Rachel:

Yeah. And it's interesting what you say, you know, about coming away from conversations and thinking, why didn't I say this, or I should have said that. And I often say to clients with most situations, not all, but with most you can revisit it. Yes. So you can go back and you can even say, I don't think I expressed myself as clearly as I wanted to, when we were talking about X or I've been reflecting on the conversation we had last week and I'd like to, to make some additional points and that sort of, oh, well I didn't seize the moment 'cause it could be very difficult to think on your feet, but you can revisit quite a lot of the time.

Deborah:

I completely agree with that and, and not only can you revisit, I think it almost adds weight to it. cause I think to be able to say, I've been think, thinking about the conversation we had yesterday, although there's something in the conversation yesterday that I can't just quite get off my mind and I just wanted to, and I think it shows that we have gone away and thought about it. And particularly if it was a slightly emotional thing that sort of instinctive behavior may have passed and both parties might be in a better place to have a more cognitive conversation about it.

Rachel:

We referred earlier to habits and a lot of this is around habits isn't it? We tend to have phrases that we use and that we may need to shift if we're going to communicate assertively. So can you tell us how that works? What type of words and phrases support assertiveness?



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Deborah:

One of the things that I find very difficult about assertiveness training and you know, working with clients around this is you can't give people a form of words because then people say, have you been on a course or, you know, and it doesn't sound like you, and it doesn't sound authentic. What I might say might be totally different to what you might say. But I think there are a few general principles and, and one of the things that I think particularly people who were born and brought up in the UK, we apologise for everything. We can apologise for the weather. We can apologise that. And it is just habit and you know, other Europeans laugh at us because they, they say, why, why do you apologise all the time? And I think that is one thing that once people are aware of it, you know, really saying, what could you replace it with?

Deborah:

So possibly one of the classic ones is do you, every time you knock on your manager's door, say, I'm sorry to bother you or you, or are you just asking them to do their job? And with, to apologise for your presence is, is already putting yourself on the back foot. So just thinking about how I could change that to maybe just getting used to saying, have you got a minute? Is this a good time? I need to talk to you about when would be the best time to come. So it can still cause people will say, well, the sorry is respectful. One can still be respectful without apologising for your presence. And I think another one that you see a lot is habitual behavior around things like accepting compliments.

Rachel:

Actually, if you give somebody compliment and they say, oh, this old thing or, oh, it was just so cheap. It's almost rebutting it. It's not very pleasant for the person that's given the compliment. And if you can say, oh, I love it too, you're kind of having that shared experience of it. It's interesting, but such a common way of, of reacting.

Deborah:

And if you know, saying, I love it too, as a bridge too far, just accepting it as a gift, so just say thank you I appreciate it or thank you that's made my day. And I think one of the weird things is, and you often see this with people with young children, if somebody compliments their children in front of them, and we've probably all done it, and the parent will say, oh, you didn't see them at five o'clock this morning and the children hear that so we get used to hearing compliments batted away. Yes and so we just continue that behavior. And I remember vividly my mom, dear mom's 92 now but I remember ringing her once and saying on the starts of all of this, like mom, why when anybody ever said anything nice about us did you tell them something that we did badly? And she said, because I was so proud of you.

Rachel:

Oh.





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Deborah:

And you know when you think oh, wow, this is how it starts and, and actually she was embarrassed because she agreed with them and, and so the embarrassment actually meant that the easiest way to do it was that, oh, they're not always like that, but the problem is the children hear that.

Rachel:

That's so interesting. Isn't it? It is. And it comes back to intent doesn't it? The intent isn't to belittle you, it's the difficult emotion that she's trying to handle and coming up with a strategy for it.

Deborah:

Yeah. And I think the other one that I would perhaps then pick up on is when you talked about what is assertive language, I think it is just slightly more directive than some of us are comfortable with. And I don't mean brutal and I don't mean harsh, but I remember years ago saying to my husband – fancy picking up a pint of milk on the way home? And he just looked at me and said, who fancies picking up a pin of milk - and you only think, yeah, nobody, nobody and really I was saying, will you or can you or even, would you mind would've been slightly better, but I think this comes back to the wanting to be liked. We want everyone to agree. Someone gave me a lovely example. On a course the other day she said oh yeah. I said to my husband the other day, would you like sausages for your tea? And she said, and he said no. And she said, I said, well, there isn't anything else.

Deborah:

And, and I just thought, yes, we do that all the time. Yeah. We, we kind of hope that people will guess where we are going with it or what we mean. And so we use quite vague language around, you really need to pull these socks up here or you really need to be a bit more professional and then we think great, I've done it. Yes. And we haven't so I think just that, and as I say, I think it's something one has to really work on individually because you want to go from very vague through to do this and do it now. And I think there's that middle road that takes a lot of practice

Rachel:

And also, I think it's, sometimes we are thinking, how would we like people to phrase things that would sit comfortably with us and we would understand, but that doesn't mean that other people are going to interpret it in the same way and to make it clean and clear means you're really making it clear to a very wide range of audiences and you can play around with the language around it so starting off a conversation in a warm way, I think some people feel like if you're being assertive, you've got to be a bit hostile, serious, and that's not the case, is it, you can be perfectly friendly, but also assertive and clear.

Deborah:

Yeah and this classic example like, well, if you could get it to me as soon as possible, what does that mean? You know, I'm really busy, I've got a huge workload end of next week is what I'm thinking, you meant by the end of the day. And again, I, as we've already said, it's not about intent. It's just about two different interpretations of the same words. And so really thinking, what do I mean by that? And do I need to say that or do I need to say to somebody, how soon do you think you can get this to me? And if





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they say week on Friday, then I might need to say, to be honest, I need it sooner than that. But I think the one thing I've learned about this is it's a lifetime's work and in many ways it's really enjoyable watching the process and we'll never get there. No-one will ever be able to say, I feel totally and utterly confident of dealing with any situation that you put me in, in an assertive way. We are always learning.

Rachel:

Yes, but I think what's interesting is that the more you do it and the, the more you see that it works. I think I remember going on an assertiveness training course and coming away and experimenting in a conversation within an estate agent and I did have real clarity that they weren't doing what they said they were going to do and I used the broken record technique of, I, you know, I had the core message and I did just say, well, no, because I think we've established that, that wasn't my responsibility, that was your responsibility so I'd like you to handle it. And they used their techniques and I said, no, but I think we have established that. that was your responsibility so if you could handle it and come back to me, that would be great. And as I was hearing myself, I can see myself now having the conversation.

Rachel:

It was such a long time ago. And there was just a click. There was a moment where I think they realised, oh, my pushback, is working and he said, oh right. Okay, well, I'll get back to you later today. And I, it was like, I'd discovered this magic power. It was so exciting now, as you say, that doesn't mean that from that point in life, I've just sailed through and everything has gone exactly the way I wanted it to. But seeing that just by making some changes, that actually did feel a bit uncomfortable, but not like I was being incredibly rude or that I didn't feel that it was reasonable behavior had a very, very different outcome. And it makes you think, okay, well, I'm gonna continue exploring this and playing around with it.

Deborah:

What you're describing there is classically what people have always called broken record technique and it can be very irritating because if somebody is just repeating the same thing over and over and not listening, but your example is a good one, because if what you are saying is, no, I recognise that and I appreciate that, however, my understanding or the email that you sent stated that this was something that you would do and wherever somebody goes with that you are actually just coming back to that key point and broken record used well is really, really powerful.

Rachel:

It is a great example, isn't it? Because just the shift of tone of voice could very easily turn it into quite an aggressive exchange.

Deborah:

Definitely.

Rachel:

So it's quite nuanced, but just being able to play around with it and experiment, and this wasn't a life or death conversation, you know, the outcome wasn't going to be catastrophic if it didn't go my way. So it's





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good to find areas where you can experiment a bit, that don't feel too high stakes. And then you build up

Deborah:

That I think is probably almost the most important thing we've talked about today, because we're talking about here stepping out of your comfort zone and doing something differently so therefore the risk attached to it has to be pretty small because if you decide to go and have the conversation you've always wanted to have with the CEO tomorrow and it goes wrong, then the risk is very high.

Rachel:

Yes.

Deborah:

But I would always say start in places where the risk is low.

Rachel:

Definitely.

Deborah:

I dunno that we've talked much about angry people. Well, I don't think it's just anger. Actually. I think if you're dealing with anybody who is exhibiting any very strong emotion, and so if you are dealing with someone that's very angry or very, the first stage of that is to allow time for them to calm down, best way to do that is to do nothing. Cause every time we speak, we inflame the situation and the average person, apparently can't rant for more than two minutes. Oh, the reason people rant, they'll say, oh, and they ranted at me for 30, 40 minutes. And it's like, well, you probably fueled it then. by trying to interrupt, by looking bored by looking at the clock. But if we truly stop and listen, people will run out of steam quite quickly.

Rachel:

That's so interesting. I would imagine telling them to calm down

Deborah:

That gives them another five minutes.

Rachel:

Exactly. Exactly. Especially if you do it in a very calm way.

Deborah:

Yes. So irritating. so I think it is about allowing somebody to speak. Clearly there are limits on that. If what they're saying is very personal or the language is unacceptable then absolutely not. But again, when I worked in the police, we had a bank phrase for that and I know mine was, I am very willing to have this conversation, however, I'm not willing to be spoken to like that. And I had practised that so





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many times that I could say it, you know, because I'd got used to saying it, but I think if it's not something that's very, just let someone run out of steam, show them you've listened by summarising back. So what I'm hearing are three key things here, or, you know, whatever that might be and then the third stage is how do we move this forward? And that might be, what would you like to see happen from here? Or when you came in here, what were you hoping I would do? Or how would you like to see this progress? We try to move people forward when they're still in the height of the emotion and that will never work.

Rachel:

That's so powerful just hearing you use those phrases, it automatically makes me feel calm and contained And that's what you want. Isn't it, that's how you're gonna get the best out of the other person.

Deborah:

Know your limits. And if at any point you feel threatened or uncomfortable by what is being said, then you need a bank phrase to stop that conversation.

Rachel:

Really, really good advice.

Rachel:

We've covered so much. I feel like I could carry on for hours, but obviously we've got lives to lead. So we'll just recap on the top tips.

There are four modes of communication in the assertiveness model, high level aggression, low level aggression, submissive, and assertive and for many people, communicating assertively is a mode of communication that doesn't come that naturally so it's helpful to work out what your usual style is, and this will help you work out what sort of communication shift might be helpful for you.

Observe other people and notice what they're doing well, not necessarily to copy it, but to work out what could work for you and come up with some different options.

Prepare for assertive communication by being clear about your rights and needs and working out what you want.

Be aware of your habits around language and behavior and build up some new assertive approaches and phrases to test

Use, breathing and grounding to help you manage your emotions and where appropriate take time out.

Notice when you are communicating assertively and congratulate yourself, no matter how small a change or win, notice growing confidence and keep going, It's a life's work.

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Rachel:

Thank you so much for your time today, Deborah, and for joining this conversation, I've learned lots and I've loved the examples and I'm sure the listeners will have learned a huge amount and be really interesting to hear of their experiences and questions. Thank you so much.

Deborah:

It's a pleasure. Thank you.

