

Most infringements or problems can typically be corrected by assertive behavior using this sequence. In relationships built on mutuality and trust, the person is likely to modify his or her behavior before the third step, the initial confrontation meeting.

## Message Formulation

Although both defending and appreciating assertion messages are dealt with in this section, the emphasis is on the formulation of defending assertion messages used to invite behavior change. In the first three subsections, the focus is on the accurate description of each of the parts of an assertion message. Defending messages are used in these sections because most often assertion involves inviting another who is infringing you to alter his or her behavior. The same format can be used in appreciating assertion to eliminate what is called judgmental praise, identified as a high-risk response in Chapter 3. In the fourth subsection, Assembling Three-Part Assertion Messages, both defending and appreciating assertion messages are considered.

While there are several ways of confronting problem behavior, three-part assertion messages are particularly effective in dealing with persistent problems—those behaviors that continue after several attempts have been made to change them. Well-prepared and skillfully delivered assertion messages can motivate others to voluntarily change their behavior without spending time in unnecessary arguments.

As indicated earlier, three-part assertion messages consist of a description of:

- The problem behavior pattern.
- Your feeling about the situation.
- The concrete and tangible negative effect of that pattern of behavior on your life.

The three parts are stated as briefly as possible and combined in one sentence, as follows:

When you (*problem behavior pattern*) . . .

I feel (*your feeling*) . . .

because (*negative effect on your life*).

This structured format helps ensure that all three parts of the message are included. As you gain experience with this method of confronting others, you will be able to develop a style that is more natural for you and will convey the three necessary pieces of information in an integrated way.

Often the phrase “as we agreed” can be added to the first part of the message to refer to the contract or agreement developed between you and another in a prior conversation. When used, it need only be stated during the first time the assertion message is sent to the other.

The following sections present guidelines and exercises to help you develop your ability to formulate each of the components of a three-part assertion message.\*

## Describing the Behavior

When another’s behavior has a negative effect on your life, one of the three things you need to communicate is a description of the behavior that is causing you a problem. Even when a person wants he or she knows exactly what is going on that troubles you.

In developing this “behavior” component of the three-part assertion message, the following guidelines are helpful:

1. Describe the behavior accurately (specify what you are seeing or hearing).
2. Include any agreements.
3. Include a brief example.

\*The following guidelines and exercises adapted from Ed Lisbe, *Assertion Messages* (unpublished manuscript made available by the author, 1980); used with permission.

4. Specify the right behavior.
5. Describe the pattern of behavior.
6. Avoid using inflammatory words.
7. Avoid using generalizations.
8. Avoid using adjectives.
9. Don't use adverbs.

These guidelines are elaborated below in short subsections, each of which presents a multiple-choice exercise, followed by a brief discussion of the most appropriate response and the inappropriate responses for the exercise. An understanding of the guidelines will enable you to formulate the first part of a three-part assertion message more effectively.

### Describe the Behavior Accurately

Describing behavior is a difficult skill. Behavior is a person's actions—what he or she says or does. It is objective—what would be seen or heard. But people tend to describe "behavior" subjectively, from their own perspective—that is, they tend to interpret behavior, focusing on what they think the behavior meant rather than on what they saw or heard. When they do that, it is *not* a description of behavior. For example, one person might see another taking paper home from the office and "describe" that action as cheating the organization. That is a personal, subjective interpretation of what happened. The behavior actually known to be involved is that of "taking paper from the office." That is the behavior you saw. To attach your interpretation of the meaning of what a person does increases the likelihood that there will be a misunderstanding when you confront him or her.

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

*Situation:* You are the principal of a small private school. You have agreed to share decision-making with your staff whenever an issue concerns them. One member, Sylvia Rossin, has absented herself from the weekly staff meeting several times, and thus has not contributed to the decision-making process. Yesterday afternoon she was absent again. Because you value her presence in the staff meeting, you decide to confront her.

*Question:* Which of the following statements best describes Sylvia Rossin's behavior?

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. "When you don't carry your share of the load in the staff meeting . . ."
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. "When you don't attend staff meetings . . ."
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. "When you disregard the needs of the staff . . ."

*Responses:*

- b. (Most Appropriate) The behavior was that Sylvia Rossin did not attend the staff meetings. This is the description of the actual behavior.
- a. (Inappropriate) From the data in the example you don't know whether or not Sylvia is doing an appropriate percentage of the workload ("carrying the load"). The behavior you are trying to change is her not attending the staff meetings.
- c. (Inappropriate) Sylvia might not have been "disregarding" the needs of the staff at all. One of the reasons she might not have attended was because she was busy with duties. Guessing someone else's motivation can lead to a needless argument. The behavior to be changed here is that of not attending the staff meetings.

### Include Any Agreements

People usually react defensively when someone confronts them about misbehavior. This defensive reaction (i.e., "I didn't do it") is natural and can therefore be expected. One way to diminish this natural

defensive tendency is to mention a prior agreement that the person made with you about the problem behavior.

To include the agreement, you can add the phrase "as we agreed" or something similar to the assertion message. This will probably help the other recognize the facts of the situation more quickly.

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

*Situation:* You are the principal of a small private school. You have agreed to share decision-making with your managers whenever an issue concerns them. One member, Sylvia Rossin, has absented herself from the weekly staff meeting several times, and thus has not contributed to the decision-making process. Yesterday afternoon she was absent again. Because you value her presence in the staff meetings, you decide to confront her.

*Question:* Which of the following statements best describes Sylvia Rossin's behavior?

- a. "When you don't attend weekly staff meetings . . ."
- b. "When you don't follow our agreement about attending staff meetings . . ."
- c. "When you don't attend weekly staff meetings, as we agreed . . ."

*Responses:*

- c. (Most appropriate) The behavior is described accurately and the agreement about attending the staff meetings is included.
- a. (Inappropriate) This is a good description of the behavior and it would probably work for you if you asserted with it. By not mentioning the agreement you made, you might have to spend more time dealing with this person's defensive reaction to you.
- b. (Inappropriate) Although your agreement was mentioned here, it is not the infringing behavior. The infringement is not attending staff meetings. An assertion has a greater chance of working if the specifics of the desired behavior are included in the message.

### Include a Brief Example

Another way to help diminish the other person's defensiveness is to give an example of the kind of problem behavior you are talking about. Specific examples will help keep the situation being discussed in a clear perspective.

Some ways to include examples are:

" . . . such as this morning when . . ."

" . . . for example, the situation with Fred yesterday."

Please read the following situation and select the best responses.

*Situation:* You are the principal of a small private school. You have agreed to share decision-making with your staff whenever an issue concerns them. One member, Sylvia Rossin, has absented herself from the weekly staff meetings several times, and thus has not contributed to the decision-making process. Yesterday afternoon she was absent again. Because you value her presence in the staff, you decide to confront her.

*Question:* Which of the following statements best describes your associate's behavior?

- a. "When you don't attend weekly staff meetings as we agreed, like yesterday . . ."
- b. "When you didn't attend the staff meeting yesterday as we agreed . . ."
- c. "When you don't attend weekly staff meetings as we agreed . . ."

*Responses:*

- a. (Most Appropriate) This message includes a description of the behavior you want changed, the agreement you made about the behavior and an example of the behavior.

- c. (Inappropriate) This is a good description of the problem behavior and it includes the agreement that was made. It does not illustrate the point with an example, something that can improve the effectiveness of the message.
- b. (Inappropriate) It is not just yesterday's meeting that is the problem. This is only one example of a behavior that has happened before. The overall behavior pattern should be stated first, with a specific instance (in this case, yesterday) added afterwards.

### Specify the Right Behavior

If you assert to someone about the wrong behavior—that is, if you are imprecise and assert about behavior other than that which is actually bothering you—the problem will not be solved. Surprisingly, this happens quite often, partly because people tend not to speak clearly when confronting others. In addition, problem situations are not always easily described, and it may be difficult to pinpoint the specific problem-causing behavior.

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

*Situation:* As a student you are required to have the addition of a class to your schedule approved by your faculty advisor. You are upset with Dr. Skobac, your adviser, over the amount of time it is taking him to respond to your request for an additional art class. Because of the delay, the class may be filled, and you will be out of luck. According to agreements, these responses should come within a couple of days.

*Question:* Which of the following is the preferred way of describing Dr. Skobac's behavior that bothers you.

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. "When you don't approve my request for an additional class . . ."
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. "When you don't approve my request for an additional class within a couple of days, as the agreement states . . ."
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. "When you don't tell me within a couple of days whether or not my additional class has been approved . . ."

### Responses:

- c. (Most Appropriate) This message lets Dr. Skobac know that you are having problems with the delay, not with whether or not the additional class gets approved.
- b. (Inappropriate) You want an answer within a couple of days. Approval would be nice, but the answer is what you are after with this assertion. This statement puts a pressure on Dr. Skobac that you are not intending and is not likely to get you what you really want.
- a. (Inappropriate) Once again you want an answer within a couple of days. Approval would be nice, but the answer is what you are after with this assertion. This statement also puts a pressure on Dr. Skobac that you are not intending and is not likely to get you what you really want.

### Describe the Pattern of Behavior

It is rarely useful to correct only one problem in a series of similar behaviors. You might get the change you want in the specific instance, but other identical problems might continue. For example, suppose you are upset about a peer's behavior pattern of usually starting meetings late. Today he began half an hour late, and you could have used that time to accomplish other tasks. Hoping to change his behavior, you make an appointment to see him. Early in the conversation you tell him:

"Fred, when you *start your meetings 30 minutes late . . .*"

After some talking, Fred assures you that it won't happen again. Three weeks later, the meeting begins 18 minutes late. Fred thinks he has met your need (since he didn't start *as late*), but you remain frustrated. You still have nearly the same problem you had originally. You got the behavior change you

requested, but not the one you really wanted. To accomplish your purpose, you would address the pattern of behavior, using the 30-minute situation, such as:

"Fred, when you *start your meetings after the scheduled time*, such as this morning, when you began 30 minutes late . . ."

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

**Situation:** Though you've discussed filing mistakes with your secretary, she still misplaces your folders. Last night, when you stayed late in the office to finish a report, it took forty-five minutes to locate one of your patient's (Mr. Peter Ames) personnel folder because it was misfiled. You found it filed in the H's. You are feeling very upset about the loss of time. You decide to confront your secretary the following morning to insure that this behavior doesn't happen again.

**Question:** What message would be most likely to correct the problem behavior?

- a. "When you file Mr. Ames' records under 'H' instead of 'A' . . ."
- b. "When you don't file Mr. Ames' record where it belongs . . ."
- c. "When you don't file material where it belongs, such as putting Mr. Ames' personnel folder under 'H' . . ."

**Responses:**

- c. (Most Appropriate) This message refers to the overall behavior pattern of which Mr. Ames' folder is a part.
- a. (Inappropriate) If this message works, and your secretary agreed to change her behavior, all you can be sure of is that Mr. Ames' record will no longer be filed under 'H'. Other misfilings might continue.
- b. (Inappropriate) If this behavior change occurs, you are only assured that Mr. Ames' record will always be filed correctly. Your problem is with other misfilings as well.

### Avoid Using Inflammatory Words

Inflammatory words used in an assertion message often trigger an emotional reaction in the person asserted to. If you say "When you *failed* to do . . .," the person you are talking with will probably focus on a different meaning of the word *fail* than the one you intended. The other might experience a higher emotional response around the word *fail* than is desirable. This high-energy response blocks his or her ability to really understand what you are saying and respond constructively to it.

"When you *neglect* to inform me about . . ." is another example of usage of an inflammatory word. To avoid using words such as *failed* or *neglected* simply substitute the words *don't* or *didn't*.

Profane words are highly inflammatory for many people and, thus, are to be avoided in an assertion statement.

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

**Situation:** You have just moved to a new city. When the brakes went out on your car, a neighbor recommended a repair shop. You had the car fixed at "Roy's Repair Shop", and within sixty days the pads and rotors needed replacement, due to faulty reconstruction. You are upset with George, the mechanic who worked on your car, because he did not follow established procedures for brake replacement, and now you have to pay. You want to change his behavior.

**Question:** How can you best phrase a description of George's behavior?

- a. "When you ignore procedures, such as not having your work checked when you have finished . . ."
- b. "When you don't follow procedures about replacement of brakes by not having your work checked when you are finished . . ."

- \_\_\_\_\_ c. "When you neglect procedures about brake replacement by not having your work checked when you are finished . . ."

*Responses:*

- b. (Most Appropriate) This message has none of the "loaded" words that tend to increase a person's tension. With this approach, you are more likely to get George to understand what you are saying about his behavior.
- a. (Inappropriate) The word "ignore" tends to make people very defensive. They are likely to respond to your statement by saying, "Ignore? What do you mean 'ignore'? I meant to do it, I just. . . ." Their energy becomes focused on the word "ignore", rather than on the message you want them to hear.
- c. (Inappropriate) "Neglect" is one of those words that triggers people emotionally. It implies not only that they didn't do something, but also that their error was somehow purposeful.

### Avoid Using Generalizations

The words *always*, *never*, and *constantly* are generalizations and imply that there are no exceptions to what you are saying. Generalizations are rarely true—especially when you are talking about someone's behavior. Few people are "always" late for work. There are usually some occasions when they arrive on time, although it might not seem so when they are frequently late. Using an absolute will probably be detrimental to your assertion. The other person is likely to argue with you about the few occasions when he or she was on time, rather than focus on your concern for the times the behavior caused you a problem.

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

*Situation:* Milton, your best friend, borrows your philosophy notes for study to supplement his own. He always promises to return them the day he uses them, but occasionally forgets. Yesterday he borrowed your notes and didn't return them, and you need them for class. This is the third time this has occurred, and you are very upset.

*Question:* Which of the following messages is preferred in terms of changing Milton's behavior?

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. "When you constantly borrow my notes and don't return them . . ."
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. "When you don't return the notes you borrow, as we agreed, like my philosophy notes yesterday . . ."
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. "When you never bother to return my notes . . ."

*Responses:*

- b. (Most Appropriate) This message describes the behavior without exaggerating the number of times it has occurred.
- c. (Inappropriate) The word "never" is not needed. Milton has probably returned the notes at least once in the past year. He will probably talk about the few times he returned the notes rather than hear your legitimate concern.
- a. (Inappropriate) The word "constantly" is not accurate and using it will not help you to get Milton to change his behavior. Milton has probably returned the notes at least once in the past year so he will tend to argue until he proves that you are wrong to say "constantly". In addition to being inaccurate, the use of the word "constantly" will tend to increase Milton's defensiveness and make it more difficult for you to get the content of your message across.

### Avoid Using Adjectives

It is important to be as specific as possible in describing behavior. Adjectives are not specific and should therefore be avoided. Adjectives tend to lead to arguments about "how long is long?" or "how short is short?" To tell a person she "takes extended breaks" or "schedules long meetings" or "submits

inaccurate reports" does not give her the kind of information she needs to change her behavior. "Long" can mean twenty minutes to one person and two hours to another. Rather than saying "When you take extended coffee breaks . . .," it would be more specific to say "When you take more than the agreed upon fifteen minutes for coffee breaks. . . ."

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

**Situation:** On several occasions Lois has received telephone messages for you and has conveyed the message inaccurately, either with the wrong name, or the wrong telephone number. This has resulted in your being unable to return the call to the person, which has embarrassed you. You are upset with Lois and decide to assert to her.

**Question:** Which of the following best tells Lois about the behavior that needs to be changed?

- a. "When you make flagrant mistakes in my telephone messages . . ."
- b. "When you give me inaccurate and incomplete phone messages . . ."
- c. "When you don't convey telephone messages to me accurately, like this morning's call with the wrong phone number . . ."

**Responses:**

- c. (Most Appropriate) You told Lois the exact part of her behavior that was causing you a problem. You describe the data you were not getting accurately, i.e., the phone number in the telephone message this morning.
- a. (Inappropriate) Since Lois gives you phone messages and names, addresses and phone numbers, she doesn't understand what is not "right" about the information. You probably think she knows what you mean, but your lack of clarity makes it difficult for Lois to know what you want.
- b. (Inappropriate) Lois doesn't know what is inaccurate about the information she gives you. In fact, she probably believes it is accurate. Further, she will probably become more defensive than necessary, making it difficult for you to resolve the problem.

### Don't Use Adverbs

When confronting another, it is usually not helpful for you to focus on the number of times the problem behavior has occurred in the past. The words *frequently*, *often*, *repeatedly*, or *regularly* in an assertion message aggravate your problem with the other in two ways:

1. The words tend to add blame to the message, because the focus becomes more on the past history than on the current behavior.
2. The words open the door to unnecessary arguments, such as "How often is often?"—the same problem that occurs with the use of absolutes and adjectives.

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

**Situation:** Your father has agreed to take a walk on the beach with you. You wanted this occasion to tell him about some of the difficulties you are having with school. He has scheduled this meeting two times and has cancelled at the last minute both times, and you are feeling annoyed.

**Question:** Which statement would probably be least likely to increase your father's defensiveness and be most likely to make him receptive to your assertion?

- a. "When you cancel appointments at the last minute, as with our appointment for a walk this morning . . ."
- b. "When you repeatedly promise to walk with me, and cancel at the last minute, like this morning . . ."
- c. "When you consistently avoid meeting with me, like this morning . . ."

**Responses:**

- a. (Most Appropriate) You have used no words to make your father feel blamed. You want to achieve change for the future and realize that references to the past is not likely to achieve that purpose. By not reminding your father of the frequency of the problem at this point, your chances of getting him to listen and to understand are increased.
- b. (Inappropriate) This is a pretty good message. The one word, repeatedly, if deleted, would clean up the message. This is because such words are often received as a form of blame and this increases defensiveness unnecessarily.
- c. (Inappropriate) With the deletion of the word "consistently" this message is satisfactory. Again, consistently can be perceived by the other as a blaming word.

## Describing Your Feelings

The second part of the three-part assertion message is a description of the feeling effect on you. It is a feeling word that captures your level of emotion about the problem behavior and its effect on your life. The lists of feelings words included in the Appendix can help you select an appropriate word to represent a particular feeling.

In developing the "feeling" component of the three-part assertion message, the following guidelines are helpful:

1. Use a feeling word that accurately describes how you feel.
2. Don't use the same word to describe all your feelings.
3. Don't use stronger feelings to build your case.
4. Don't use "victim" words.

Each of these guidelines is elaborated below. The multiple-choice exercises provided in the subsections covering the guidelines are followed by brief discussions of the most appropriate response and the inappropriate responses for each exercise.

### Use a Feeling Word That Accurately Describes How You Feel

Describing your feelings in a three-part assertion message is an effective way to convey to the other person the importance of what you are saying. A major consideration when choosing a feeling word is to be sure it appropriately captures your level of emotion about the infringing behavior. For example, you could be furious about the same behavior that would only irritate someone else. The feeling word is unique for each person who is infringed by another.

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

**Situation:** Carrie doesn't think she should be as upset as she is about Rachel's disorganization in the apartment, because she is such an outstanding roommate in other respects. What bothers her most about the disorder is that Rachel herself doesn't know where things are when they need to locate things. She ends up sorting through drawer after drawer for a needed item. This takes a great deal more time than it would if she helped keep the apartment organized. They talked about this behavior before, but it seems that Rachel is just one of those non-detail oriented people. Carrie is considering talking to her again, but doesn't know the "best" approach regarding how much of her feelings to express—especially because she doesn't want to turn off such a good roommate.

**Question:** What would be the most appropriate feeling for Carrie to add to this message?

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. ". . . I feel somewhat upset."
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. ". . . I really feel frustrated."
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. ". . . it bothers me a little."

**Responses:**

- b. (Most Appropriate) This is probably close to what Carrie is feeling. If Rachel has persisted in her behavior, despite Carrie's previous attempts at talking with her, she needs to know the strength of her feeling. This understanding will help to make her more receptive to changing her problem behavior.
- a. (Inappropriate) Carrie is more than "somewhat upset". Worse, her feelings of resentment seem to be building. If she doesn't let Rachel know her genuine feelings, the fine living relationship they now have will probably deteriorate.
- c. (Inappropriate) Tempering her approach in this way, so as not to turn Rachel off, can only lead her to one conclusion: "She must not be too upset about this." Carrie needs to let her know that she is not liking this one particular behavior. If, given the overall perspective of her excellent behavior she wasn't bothered, she wouldn't need to say anything.

**Don't Use the Same Word to Describe All Your Feelings**

For many people, feelings are limited to such words as *good*, *bad*, *happy*, and *sad*. The range of anger words, from *upset* and *irritated* to *furios* and *irate*, usually all end up as "I'm angry". The word *frustrated* also tends to cover several levels of feeling.

It helps another believe that your life is negatively affected by his or her behavior if you can label the real feeling it causes in you.

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

**Situation:** One of your students has an excellent mind and contributes much to the class. There is one problem that concerns you with this person. She is erratic in meeting deadlines. She will be on time for several assignments, then, with no warning, she will miss a deadline and appears to think that doesn't matter. It creates an uneasy feeling in you because she does this often enough so that you never know for sure where she is on her commitments for class assignments.

**Question:** Which feeling word would be most appropriate to add to your message?

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. ". . . I feel angry . . ."
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. ". . . I feel upset . . ."
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. ". . . I'm feeling worried . . ."

**Responses:**

- c. (Most Appropriate) Being worried carries with it the sense of concern, agitation and the unknown quality of the situation. It indicates a serious problem that causes you to think a lot about it. Probably it is more on target to say you feel worried than to say you're upset or irritated.
- a. (Inappropriate) A general sense of anger conveys no special information about the particular situation here.
- b. (Inappropriate) "Upset" could cover a range of behaviors from a type of stomachache to grief over the loss of a loved one. Using that word here adds nothing significant to your message.

**Don't Use Stronger Feelings to Build Your Case**

Again, the power of assertion lies in its simplicity. It is a statement of genuine concern about a problem behavior from one person to another. To convince another to change his or her behavior, you need to indicate a legitimate feeling about its effect on your life.

To say, "I am outraged that you are three minutes late for our meeting after we've discussed the importance of punctuality . . ." would make that situation laughable. It is better to use a word that expresses how you really feel, such as *annoyed*. This makes your whole message congruent and therefore more believable to the person whose behavior you want to change.

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

**Situation:** Kevin frequently comes into your apartment to borrow your records without asking. Although he usually returns them, it is his not asking that upsets you. You have spoken with him on two other occasions about the problem. You feel awkward about asking him whether he took a record which you have just discovered to be missing.

**Question:** Which feeling word should you use to assert to Kevin?

- a. “. . . I’m feeling abused and manipulated . . .”
- b. “. . . I’m feeling irritated . . .”
- c. “. . . I am outraged by your behavior . . .”

**Responses:**

- b. (Most Appropriate) This seems closest to describing the current situation for you. Not only are you being infringed by the record-borrowing, but now one is missing.
- a. (Inappropriate) You don’t need feeling words this strong to have a successful assertion. There may be a variety of reasons for your inability at this time to ask Kevin about the missing record. “Abused” and “manipulated” are unlikely to help you accomplish your goals.
- c. (Inappropriate) “Outrage” would seem to be a strong word for most people in this situation. You spoke twice to Kevin about the problem. Your needs are not getting met and you want to confront Kevin to change the problem behavior. A different level of energy, perhaps something like “aggravated” or “discouraged”, is probably closer to the real feeling at this point.

### Don’t Use “Victim” Words

The primary goal of assertion is to change another’s problem behavior. Words such as *hurt*, *disappointed*, and *let down* are not focused on that purpose. These words have a tendency to result in people feeling guilty instead of enabling them to change their behavior. “I feel hurt,” for example, seems directed toward letting the other person know that he or she did not meet your expectations. The behavior change you want then becomes secondary.

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

**Situation:** You are the principal of a school. One of your teachers, Justin Perman, has agreed to do better at confronting students in the class for their poor discipline. This agreement resulted from several meetings you had with Justin to solve the problem. This new behavior means a lot to you because parents of some of the children are taking up a lot of your time complaining about class discipline. Prior to this meeting you had spent time in the classroom working with problem students. You have also spent time coaching the teacher in assertion. Things had been improving, but yesterday you received four calls from upset parents. You felt your work was meaningless and the problem was right back where you started.

**Question:** Which feeling word is most appropriately directed to getting your needs met?

- a. “. . . I’m feeling frustrated . . .”
- b. “. . . I feel disappointed . . .”
- c. “. . . I feel let down . . .”

**Response:**

- a. (Most Appropriate) You are frustrated about the result you didn’t get with this problem solving time and let Justin know your feelings. The message to Justin is: The result wasn’t achieved!
- b. (Inappropriate) By saying that you were “disappointed”, you are focusing mostly on Justin’s relationship with you, not the problem behavior. The emotion is centered around Justin not living up to your expectations. The message to Justin is: You let me down!
- c. (Inappropriate) This message to Justin seems to be: You didn’t do it for me! The implication is that pleasing you is a higher priority than changing a problem behavior to get better results.

## Describing the Negative Effect on Your Life

The third component of the three-part assertion message is a description of the negative effect the problem behavior has on you. This is another piece of information you need to tell a person whose behavior is affecting your life in a negative way. Even when you describe the problem behavior itself accurately, if you don't communicate the problems that behavior is causing you in a way that helps the other person understand the negative impact the behavior has on your life, he or she is not as likely to change the problem behavior.

In developing the "negative effect" component of the three-part assertion message, the following guidelines are helpful:

1. Specify the effect as concretely as possible.
2. State the effect on *your* life.
3. Avoid using reasons.
4. Don't exaggerate the effect.
5. Don't use an effect that "sounds good" but isn't true.

Each of these guidelines is elaborated below. The multiple-choice exercises provided in the subsections covering the guidelines are followed by brief discussions of the most appropriate response and the inappropriate responses for each exercise.

### Specify the Effect as Concretely as Possible

People are not easily persuaded to change their behavior. Their openness to change (other than in response to a threat of punishment) usually depends upon your ability to convince them that their behavior is somehow affecting your life in a negative way. The best way to do this is to state, as concretely as possible, what the effect is. Concrete and tangible effects usually involve your time, property, money, or health. Some ways to "measure" the effects on your life of someone else's behavior are in terms of what that behavior costs you, such as:

- Additional time spent ("I have to take longer to complete my work").
- Increased expenditures ("I can't keep within my budget").
- Damaged health ("I have an allergy and can hardly breathe").

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

*Situation:* You are a manager responsible for the output of a department. The nature of your work requires you to schedule each person's activities carefully, in advance, to coordinate with what the others are doing. Because of your need for advance planning, you establish a policy in your department requiring all employees to give you at least three or four days' notice when they want to take a vacation day. Most comply with the policy, but one person usually waits until the last minute to let you know. She did it again this morning on a day when you were counting on her to complete some calculations needed by two of your other workers. You determine to speak to her about this problem to resolve it so it doesn't happen again.

*Question:* Which phrase is "measurable" in a way most likely to convince this employee that your life is negatively affected by her behavior.

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. ". . . because I can't get my work done."
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. ". . . because I have to spend extra time reworking my schedule to keep output up when I could be doing other things."
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. ". . . because we've spoken about this before and it shouldn't have happened again."

**Responses:**

- b. (Most appropriate) You spent time making up a schedule. If you knew in advance that this person would not be at work, you could have taken that into account. Now, you must re-do the work you've done and the extra work was not necessary.
- a. (Inappropriate) This might be true to some degree. However, this statement is too general and vague to convince the person that your life is genuinely affected.
- c. (Inappropriate) This statement blames the other person more than it informs her. Your goal of changing her behavior will best be met by telling her how you are affected by what she does. Remember, you are trying to get a voluntary behavior change, rather than to use your position power.

**State the Effect on Your Life**

Unless you show the other person how your own life is directly affected by what he or she does, the other will probably not be motivated to change the behavior. Instead, the conversation will usually be diverted from your assertion to an argument about whether or not the effect really bothers you.

If the effect is on your life or work or the unit for which you are responsible, the other person will usually see that as an effect on you. Generally, you should avoid stating an effect on someone else. Examples of stating an effect on someone else are:

- “ . . . because Beth has a more difficult time writing her reports.”
- “ . . . because you won't meet your deadlines.”
- “ . . . because it disturbs Tamara's sleep.”

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

**Situation:** You work in a studio with two other artists. The three of you are responsible for keeping the place orderly. One of your group leaves her ceramic materials unwashed and the place in a general mess. You have asked her three times to help keep the studio orderly. When you got to work this morning, you again had to clean up the studio before you could start work. You have decided to confront her.

**Question:** Which statement shows the effect of this person's behavior on your life?

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. “ . . . because if you get away with it, the others will start doing it.”
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. “ . . . because we will have to clean up.”
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. “ . . . because I must do the clean up myself.”

**Responses:**

- c. (Most appropriate) You are concerned primarily with how the work is going to get done. Your statement indicates what you will have to do (the effect on your life) to clean up.
- a. (Inappropriate) This effect is probably accurate. It does not, however, tell the person how that result affects you. If you are most worried about what the others will begin doing, to get to the measurable effect on your life, you should ask this question: “If other people start doing it, what price will I pay?” The answer will be that you will have to spend additional time to clean up.
- b. (Inappropriate) The use of “we” instead of “I” indicates an effect of which I can't be certain. You can only account for the effect on you personally. If you use “we” you open yourself to a comment “Sally doesn't see it that way” and you are then involved in an argument.

**Avoid Using Reasons**

Explaining why you are upset about someone's behavior, rather than how it affects you, does not help persuade the other person to change the behavior. The other still might not see that his or her behavior makes any major, concrete difference in your life. For example, when another is repeatedly late for staff meetings, you might correctly assert: “When you are late for staff meetings, as with the meeting

today, I feel annoyed, because I then need to take extra time to bring you up to date on material you missed." Using reasons for the negative effect decreases the effectiveness of the assertion message by obscuring the negative effect. Some reasons might be:

- “ . . . because knowing this material is important for your job.”
- “ . . . because I can't be responsible for always keeping you up to date.”

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

*Situation:* One of Susan's job responsibilities is to proofread and edit the chancellor's reports before they are passed out to the Executive Board members each month. Sometimes Susan forgets or runs out of time and she distributes the copies without being proofed. The last time this happened, one of the Board members mentioned to the Chancellor that he saw three or four errors, saying "it looked a little unprofessional." The Chancellor decides to speak to Susan again about this part of her work assignment.

*Question:* Which statement shows the effect of Susan's behavior on the Chancellor, rather than a reason for the Chancellor being upset?

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. “ . . . because I lose stature with the Board.”
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. “ . . . because I am held responsible for it.”
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. “ . . . because I don't have the report I want for the meeting.”

*Responses:*

- a. (Most appropriate) The effect on the Chancellor's life is that he is looked upon with less favor by the Board. This can have many serious future consequences for him if the problem behavior continues.
- b. (Inappropriate) The reason the Chancellor is upset is because he will be held accountable. This does not tell Susan how the Chancellor's life will be affected by this accountability. In response to this reason, Susan might simply say, "Don't worry about it, they know you're doing a good job." She couldn't make this kind of response if the Chancellor had told her the effect on his life.
- c. (Inappropriate) "Not having a report" is not the reason the Chancellor is upset. It is not a statement showing the effect on his life. The effect can be determined by asking "So what?" How am I affected because I don't have this report? The answer might be any number of things, and whichever one it is should become the "effect" statement.

### Don't Exaggerate the Effect

People will accept the fact that you have a problem if you can legitimately demonstrate to them how your life is affected in a negative way. It is usually more truthful to say, for example, that as a result of the other's behavior, you will have "a more difficult time" doing something than to say you "can't" do it. Others are likely to believe that their behaviors cause you problems but are not likely to believe that they make your task or life impossible.

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

*Situation:* Your best friend, Jaret, with whom you have played raquetball for over two years, has not showed up for an agreed upon raquetball game for the third time this semester. You are very irritated with his behavior, since it is difficult to get a partner at the last minute. After you have built it into your schedule and are really counting on it, the late cancellation makes it almost impossible for you to play.

*Question:* Which effect on your life is Jaret more apt to believe?

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. “ . . . because I never get my exercise.”
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. “ . . . because of your behavior, I can't play raquetball.”
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. “ . . . because it is difficult to get a partner at the last minute and I often end up not playing.”

**Responses:**

- c. (Most appropriate) The effect on your life is an unnecessary and unfair increase in your time and energy.
- b. (Inappropriate) You can play raquetball. You might have to practice yourself or you might not be happy about the partner you can get at the last moment. But you can play. An exaggeration here will lessen the impact of your legitimate concern.
- a. (Inappropriate) "Never" is an absolute—doubtfully true. The other person will probably say something like this to you: "What do you mean never?" Another problem with this message is that not getting any exercise is probably an exaggeration. It might be true at this time, but not always.

**Don't Use an Effect That "Sounds Good" but Isn't True**

Many people are strongly tempted to ensure the success of their assertion by making it stronger than it actually is. Their belief is usually that "my negative effect probably isn't good enough."

Do not search for the "best" effect. The more you try to increase the stakes, the more you will decrease the effectiveness of your message. Instead, determine the real effect on your life and state it. Assertion generally works because of its simple honesty—one human being telling another, clearly and without a hidden agenda, about a specific behavior that is troublesome and how it affects his or her life. Most people respond to this sincere, straightforward approach.

Please read the following situation and select the best response.

**Situation:** Emily dislikes Gay's habit of coming to her to complain about others in the office. Emily decides to put together an assertion message to see if she can confront Gay about this behavior.

**Question:** Which is the real effect on Emily's life and the statement most likely to change Gay's behavior?

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. ". . . because I don't have enough time to complete my work."
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. ". . . because I don't like talking about other people."
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. ". . . because it disrupts my flow of concentration and I lose good ideas."

**Responses:**

- b. (Most appropriate) Emily doesn't like the content of Gay's conversation. Emily appropriately addresses herself to this issue.
- a. (Inappropriate) Emily is more upset about the "gossipy" nature of Gay's conversation than with the fact that it intrudes on her work time. The effect that is real for her—the talking about others—should be the focus.
- c. (Inappropriate) This disruption of "concentration flow" is probably not accurate. It sounds like a better reason to assert, but it is not the current negative effect on Emily's life. Gay probably won't "buy" it, and therefore, will probably not change her behavior.

**Assembling Three-Part Assertion Messages**

As mentioned earlier, assertion messages can be used either to defend or to express appreciation. In the following two sections, exercises are provided to help you become more skillful in formulating both types of three-part assertion messages.

**Defending Assertion Messages**

A three-part defending assertion message always contains a statement telling the other person what he or she did (a description of the problem behavior), your feelings about the problem, and how your life was negatively affected in a measurable way. It is normally used to defend personal rights, usually involving your time, property, money, or health. This type of assertion message is effective because there

is a high probability that it will alter the other person's troublesome behavior without diminishing the other's self-esteem or damaging the relationship. The three-part defending assertion message does not judge or blame the other. It merely discloses the feelings you experienced in response to the other's behavior that has infringed on you in some way. The other person remains free to arrive at his or her solution to the intrusion that meets your needs.

The defending assertion message should be succinct and stated in one sentence. Although the three parts of the message may be given in any order, it is preferable to begin by learning the sequence presented earlier in the chapter. To review, the three-part sequence is:

"When you \_\_\_\_\_ I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_."

1. "When you \_\_\_\_\_ . . ." Concrete, specific, nonjudgmental description of the behavior that is infringing on your space. (Direct and short, not blaming.)
2. ". . . I feel \_\_\_\_\_ . . ." Appropriate, accurate disclosure of your feelings about the other's behavior.
3. ". . . because \_\_\_\_\_ ." Description of the concrete and tangible negative effects of the other's behavior on you. What it means or what it costs you. (Should be buyable, publicly observable and make sense to the other person.)

**EXAMPLE:**

*Behavior Description*

When you don't show up for the staff meeting on time as we agreed, such as yesterday's conference

*Feelings*

I feel aggravated

*Effect*

I need to take extra time bringing you up to date.

Read the following statements and write an appropriate three-part assertion message for each. Use the example as a guide.

1. You are the president of the student council. Your vice-president is continually absent from meetings, causing you to meet with him later to bring him up to date on material discussed.

When you \_\_\_\_\_  
 I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
 because \_\_\_\_\_

2. You work in an office with two other secretaries. The three of you are responsible for keeping the place orderly. One of your group leaves her coffee cups unwashed and the place in a general mess. You have asked her three times to help keep the office orderly. When you got to work this morning, you again had to clean up the office before you could start work.

When you \_\_\_\_\_  
 I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
 because \_\_\_\_\_

3. You are a teacher. You have reserved some audio-visual equipment to use today. Another teacher took the equipment you reserved for your use at the time you reserved it. There is no other equipment available for you to use and the audio-visual material was the key to your lesson plan today. This is the third time you have had the problem with this teacher.

When you \_\_\_\_\_  
 I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
 because \_\_\_\_\_

4. Sheldon, the bookstore cashier with whom you work, spends more time chatting with customers than serving them. The lines get longer and longer, and people are genuinely angry and irritated when they finally arrive at your register for service. As a co-worker, you are disturbed about Sheldon's behavior.

When you \_\_\_\_\_  
I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_

5. Aunt Marie is always bringing up her health problems at every family gathering often interrupting the conversation to do so. You find this personally irritating.

When you \_\_\_\_\_  
I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_

6. You ride to school with your neighbor. She is late for the fourth time in three weeks, causing you to be late for class.

When you \_\_\_\_\_  
I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_

7. The roving science teacher left the classroom in a mess for the fourth week in a row. You have had to rush to clean the room up for your own class the following period.

When you \_\_\_\_\_  
I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_

8. The personnel director always calls meetings to begin about half an hour before the end of the working day and the meetings run on and on. You want to be home on time to prepare the evening meal and you are late every time he holds one of these late meetings.

When you \_\_\_\_\_  
I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_