

THE EXECUTIVE GROUP

TALENT MANAGEMENT & DEVELOPMENT

ASSERTIVENESS TRIGGERS EXPLAINED

Why is it that some people are uncomfortable with being assertive?

What are the behavioral triggers that make people uncomfortable with being assertive?

This article will explore the dynamics behind why some folks struggle with this basic soft skill people need to master. The behavioral trigger that makes people uncomfortable with being assertive is often the fear of a negative reaction from another person — particularly the fear of rejection, conflict, disapproval, or damaging a relationship.

Yet there is a deeper distinction: some people know what they want to say, yet feel uncomfortable saying it because they associate assertiveness with being aggressive, selfish, controlling, or unlikable.

Let's break down the psychology.

The Five Behavioral Triggers Behind Difficulty with Assertiveness

1. Fear of disapproval

The underlying belief: “If I stand up for myself, this person may not like me anymore.”

The person prioritizes maintaining acceptance over expressing a need, disagreement, or boundary. They may agree outwardly while feeling resentment internally.

2. Conflict avoidance

The underlying belief: “If I challenge this, things could get uncomfortable or escalate.”

The person anticipates an argument, an angry response, or emotional tension. Avoiding the conversation provides immediate relief, which reinforces the avoidance behavior.

3. Excessive need for approval

The underlying belief: “My value depends on how other people perceive me.”

The person becomes overly concerned with being seen as competent, reasonable, helpful, or likable. Disagreement feels like a threat to their self-image.

4. Guilt about prioritizing oneself

The underlying belief: “Putting my needs first is selfish.”

The person may feel responsible for other people's feelings and experience guilt when saying no, asking for something, or establishing a limit.

5. Fear of being wrong or exposed

The underlying belief: “What if I speak up and cannot defend my position?”

The person overthinks, qualifies every statement, delays expressing an opinion, or seeks more certainty than the situation requires. Perfectionism and low confidence can contribute.

The Behavioral Sequence: What Actually Happens?

The trigger is often not assertiveness itself. It is the anticipated consequence of being assertive.

Trigger

Someone disagrees, crosses a boundary, makes a demand, or challenges you.

Interpretation

“They might get angry, reject me, or think less of me.”

Emotional response

Anxiety, guilt, self-doubt, or tension.

Behavior

Remain silent, soften the message excessively, overexplain, or give in.

Short-term reward

The immediate discomfort disappears, making avoidance more likely next time.

This last step is particularly important. In behavioral psychology, it is an example of negative reinforcement: avoiding an uncomfortable experience brings relief, which strengthens the avoidance habit.

Over time, a person may become increasingly uncomfortable with assertiveness even when the actual consequences of speaking up would be minor.

The Deeper Issue: What Is the Person Trying to Protect?

In many cases, the person is protecting one of three things:

The relationship: "I don't want to risk losing this person."

Their self-image: "I don't want to be viewed as difficult, weak, or incompetent."

Their sense of safety or control: "I don't want an unpredictable confrontation."

The dominant driver matters because two people can exhibit the same behavior for completely different reasons.

For example, one person avoids disagreement because they desperately want approval. Another avoids it because they grew up around explosive conflict. A third hesitates because they need to feel completely certain before defending a position.

The outward behavior looks similar, but the intervention should differ.

Identify The Dominant Trigger

Consider the situation that most resembles the person you have in mind.

A. What feels most uncomfortable about being assertive?

- Someone might dislike me or think less of me.
- The situation might turn into an argument.
- I feel guilty for putting my needs first.
- I might be wrong or unable to defend my position.
- I dislike losing control of how the other person responds.

B. What does the person typically do?

- Stays silent or gives in.
- Overexplains, apologizes, or qualifies everything.
- Thinks of what to say afterward but struggles in the moment.
- Suppresses feelings until they become frustrated or angry.

C. Where does this happen most?

- Romantic relationships or family.
- Work, leadership, or business.
- Across most areas of life.

Analyze the Behavioral Pattern

The central point: The most useful question is not simply, “Why is this person unassertive?” It is, “What does this person believe will happen if they assert themselves?” That anticipated consequence is often the key to understanding and changing the behavior.

More specifically, the person perceives that speaking up, disagreeing, saying no, or establishing a boundary could threaten their acceptance, relationship, status, or sense of safety.

But there is an important distinction between the trigger and the underlying cause.

The Behavioral Mechanism

Trigger: A situation requires the person to express a need, disagree, or stand their ground.

Perceived threat: They anticipate rejection, conflict, disapproval, or being judged.

Emotional response: Anxiety, guilt, fear, or self-doubt emerges.

Behavior: They become passive, overexplain, soften their position, or avoid speaking up.

Reinforcement: Avoiding confrontation provides immediate relief, making the behavior more likely to recur.

What Is the Deeper Psychological Driver?

There are three common possibilities:

Fear of rejection: “If I assert myself, they might not like me.”

Fear of conflict: “If I challenge them, things might get ugly.”

Fear of negative evaluation: “If I stand my ground, they might think I'm selfish, difficult, or incompetent.”

These are related but distinct. The dominant trigger varies by person and situation.

The Key Insight

People are often not afraid of being assertive; they are afraid of the consequences they associate with being assertive.

That association may develop through childhood experiences, previous relationships, workplace environments, or repeated experiences in which speaking up led to punishment, rejection, or conflict.

The way to build assertiveness is to learn that you can express your position respectfully without needing to control the other person's reaction.