

# MANAGING WORK-LIFE BALANCE WITH ASSERTIVENESS

Nikole J Cronk, PhD

# Outline



- Work-Life Balance & Burnout
- The Case for Assertive Communication
- Giving Constructive (Negative) Feedback
- Giving Opinions
- Saying “No” Assertively
- Conflict Management

# Work-Life Balance: What is that?



- 24 hour day
  - 8 hours sleep
  - 8 hours work
  - 8 hours life
- The right balance may look different for different people, phases of life, etc.
- Work-life pendulum

# Work-Life Balance: Why does it matter?

- **Burnout**
  - Exhaustion
  - Cynicism
  - Reduced Professional Efficacy
- **Consequences**
  - Job performance (absenteeism, turnover, interpersonal conflict, task disruptions, morale)
  - Health (stress-related health problems)

# Burnout

## ○ Causes

- Overload (more tasks to do than time allows)
- Role conflict & role ambiguity
- Lack of support (esp. from supervisors)
- Lack of feedback
- Mismatches:
  - Workload
  - Control
  - Reward
  - Community
  - Fairness
  - Values

# Case example

- It is recruitment season and you are asked by your program director to stay late to help organize the feedback and files for the new applicants for the 5th time in as many weeks. She approaches you with a perceived expectation that you will say yes because "we are all part of the residency team." As it turns out, you had made plans to go out to dinner with your spouse to celebrate an achievement they had at work.
- What is "the best" approach?
- What is your most likely approach?

# Case example



- What are the issues at play here?
- Where do your loyalties lie?
- What are the costs and benefits of different approaches?
- What does assertiveness have to do with this?

# When assertiveness helps

- Correcting colleague/staff/other behavior
- Dealing with problematic faculty members
- Communicating with people from other departments/institutions, etc.
- Speaking up at meetings
- Resolving conflict among team members
- Relaying information between people in different roles
- Offering ideas about training, systems, etc.
- Negotiating plans



# Why Assertiveness?



- Implications for the issue at hand
- Broader implications for self-presentation
  - Future relevance, impact
- Effects on the people around you

# Opportunities to be Assertive

---

- Giving constructive feedback
- Giving opinions
- Saying “No”
- Managing conflict & negotiations

# Giving Constructive Feedback

- **Focus explicitly on behavior**
  - Not the person or personal traits
  - **No:** “You have a bad attitude.”
  - **Yes:** “It’s disruptive when you complain openly in front of others.”
- **Provide examples of consequences of behavior**
  - “When you complain, it causes others to feel badly, making morale and productivity go down.”

# Giving Constructive Feedback

## ○ Use Good Timing

- NOT when person is stressed, tired, busy
- Must hear the message
  - Be capable of responding
- Be ready for a response – may be emotional
  - (You don't have to take ownership or responsibility for the emotion)

# Giving Constructive Feedback

- **Balance positive and negative**
  - Old Sandwich: positive, **negative**, positive
  - Better: elicit, provide, elicit
    - What do think; Here's my feedback; What do you think of that
  - Too much negative can shut down the recipient
  - Avoid washing out the feedback
- **Practice!**
  - Rehearse what you want to say
  - Stick to your point (recipient may distract)
  - Don't be thrown off course

# Giving Constructive Feedback

- **Be specific**
  - Give examples whenever possible
  - “Timeliness has become problematic. For example, yesterday when you were late to work, it caused the following problems for staff...”
- **Give information, NOT advice**
  - Respect the autonomy of the recipient
  - They may not choose to accept your feedback
    - Ironically, this increases the likelihood they will

# Giving Constructive Feedback

## ○ **Remove Emotions**

- Recipient emotion will likely already be high
- Being calm and unemotional helps the message be heard
- Be empathic, but not to the point of drowning the feedback

# Giving Opinions

## ○ Common Styles

- Passive

- Avoid sharing opinions whenever possible
- Wait for others to go first and agree
- Change opinions to avoid conflict

- Aggressive

- Share opinions whenever possible
- Put others' opinions down if they are in conflict
- Try to change others' views to fit your own



# Giving Opinions

## ○ Common Styles

### • Passive-Aggressive

- Avoid direct disagreement, but disagree in other settings
- Talk about people/views when they are absent
- When challenged, deny any negative intent

### • Assertive

- Express opinion and take ownership of it
- Open to others' thoughts/views w/o being too easily swayed for the sake of agreeing
- Respectful of others

# Giving Opinions

- **Relax!**
  - Think clearly about what you'll say
- **Rehearse**
  - Clearly word your thoughts
  - Gets easier with more practice
- **Don't show lack of confidence**
  - "I may be totally off base here, but..."
  - Can still be open to other views
  - Don't undermine yourself

# Giving Opinions

- **Own your message**

- Use “I” statements
  - “My opinion on this is...” vs “Other staff are saying...”

- **Don't apologize**

- Apologies are only appropriate if you've crossed a boundary
  - Do you really regret having an opinion?

- **Allow room for others' views**

- Avoid “everyone knows...”

# Giving Opinions

- **Be mindful of intimidating**
  - Monitor tone of voice, volume, body posture
  - Avoid guilt
- **Consider before justifying your opinion**
  - Undermines your opinion, credibility
  - Your opinion is valid regardless of others' views
  - Places all the control with the other person

# Saying “No” Assertively

- **Use an assertive body posture**
  - Direct eye contact
  - Keep head up, shoulders back, hands relaxed
  - Calm and audible voice
  - Body should say “no,” not “maybe”
- **Know your position before you speak**
  - If you don’t know, don’t answer
  - Know precisely what is and is not going to work/happen, etc.

# Saying “No” Assertively

- **Wait for the question**
  - Don't agree to an anticipated request
  - Monitor your desire to be a people pleaser
- **Don't apologize**
  - Suggests the other person is entitled to a “yes”
  - Undermines your control and authority
  - Puts you in the other person's debt

# Saying “No” Assertively

## ○ **Don't defend**

- Avoid making excuses, especially false ones
  - “I would take on that project for you, but my brother is coming into town.”

## ○ **Don't ask permission**

- You have the right to say no – whether or not others like it
  - “Would it be okay if I didn't...”
- Permission communicates someone else is in charge of your behavior

# Saying “No” Assertively

- **Be consistent – avoid rephrasing**
  - Barring a real communication barrier, rephrasing sounds like weakening
  - Invites stronger pressure from the other person
- **Be willing to accept the consequences**
  - You have the right to say “no” – others have the right not to like it



# Managing Conflict & Negotiation

## ○ **Prevention > Cure**

- Utilizing assertive communication can help prevent conflict from developing
- Establishing a reputation for assertiveness can alter the way others interact with and around you

## ○ **Ears first, voice second**

- Everyone likes to be heard and validated
- Hear & reflect both sides before proceeding
- Find the grain of truth in each perspective

# Managing Conflict & Negotiation

## ○ Reason rules

- Not everyone can win, but everyone can potentially feel like a winner
- Explain clearly your perspective using the grain of truth in the “losing” side

## ○ Feelings really actually do matter

- Even when you can't support a course of action or idea, you can validate the thoughts and/or feelings
- This is often enough to satisfy the “losing” party

# Conclusions

- Assertive communication is effective, important and able to be learned
- Enhances up, down and lateral communication
- Facilitates effective conflict management and negotiation skills
- YOU can be an assertive communicator
- Practice is the key!
- “The Assertiveness Workbook” by Randy J. Paterson, PhD