Professional standards
Glenys Bridges provides a guide to work

Applying the qualities and attributes of professionalism are an essential requirement for all healthcare professionals. In the dental profession standards of professionalism stem from regulations set out in the Dentist Act and Health and Social Care Act. I often meet dental professionals who are aware that they do not wholly meet some aspects of these requirements. Such shortfalls can stem from the practical pressures encountered in day-to-day workplace situations, or from a lack of knowledge and understanding, or from unassertive, unproductive behaviour which fails to focus on goals. This article provides a guide for DCPs who want to become more assertive at work.

Most people are aware that assertiveness is an attribute which enables those who are shy or lack confidence to become more involved. Assertiveness also helps the more extrovert or volatile people to fine tune their interactions with patients, suppliers and colleagues. An assertive person is a positive, resourceful presence in dental teams. Therefore an important aspect of professional and personal development should be to avoid unproductive patterns, in favour of focusing on goals, solving problems and feeling at ease at work.

So how can you start to develop more assertive behaviour patterns? From the outset it is essential to recognise that assertiveness is not about getting your way at the expense of others. Professional assertiveness is about feeling at ease when setting your standards and maintaining them, without violating the rights of others. Here are three basic and essential steps to help you to achieve this.

Listen and show understanding - productive assertiveness is based on good communication skills. This means taking enough time to understand all points of view and vested interests. You may not agree with other people’s views, but goals are most easily met when information gathering clarifies matters and leads to consensus.

Say what you mean, how you feel or what you think - this can be more difficult. Manage your state of mind so that it supports you in being assertive. When communicating state the facts, rather than relying on personal opinions alone. Describe your thoughts and feelings about the situation (for example, determined, confident), then go on to clarify your needs (say what you want the other person to do). Always close the conversation by summarising your main points. Finally ensure your make sure you maintain assertive nonverbally communications with steady eye contact, a serious expression and a firm voice with a moderate rate of speech.

Say what you want or what action you want taken - having set the scene you are now at the point where you need to make a clear request. This should be based on the facts, regulations or requirements of the situation. Being assertive is no guarantee that you will achieve the desired outcome, but it dramatically increases the chances.

Recognising the need to develop assertiveness skills is just the beginning. If assertiveness is not naturally part of your character a first step is to model on someone whose assertiveness you admire. To do this think of someone whose assertiveness underpins high professional standards, without unduly antagonising others. This person would make an ideal coach or mentor able to direct and support you by sharing their philosophy, strategies, techniques and thinking patterns.

About the author

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