



# How to make assertiveness work for you

Lean In Circle Discussion Guide

The  
Women  
at Work  
Collection

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## Meeting agenda approx 80 mins

### Member updates

15 mins

### Watch video

6 mins

### Icebreaker

12 mins

### Activities

- Activity 1: Identifying shared goals
- Activity 2: Pairing assertiveness with empathy

20 mins

20 mins

### One Action

3 mins

#### For Circles with only 60 mins, here are suggestions to shorten this agenda:

- Encourage members to watch the video in advance
- Spend 10 mins on member updates
- Spend 15 mins on activity 1 and activity 2

# Getting started

## Member updates

2 mins or less per member

15-20 mins depending on group size

Go around your Circle and share personal updates. Generally, personal updates should be brief and focus on significant changes and important decisions in your life. (It's OK not to have one every month!) If you have a One Action update, share that with your Circle.

## Watch video

6 mins

## Icebreaker

12 mins

- Take a few minutes to reflect on the following list of adjectives.
- Then, as a volunteer reads the list aloud, go around the room and raise your hand if you've ever been described with any of these words at work:
  - Difficult
  - Abrasive
  - Aggressive
  - Emotional
  - Strident
  - Angry
  - Too opinionated
  - Too nice
  - Raise your hand if you've ever held back on sharing your opinion because you feared being seen as difficult or unlikable.
- Go around your Circle and have a few group members share their experiences (10 minutes or less).

## Activity 1: Identifying shared goals

20 mins

As we learned in the video, it is often easier for colleagues to hear assertive opinions when they are tied to your organization's mission and goals. Take 10 minutes to create three lists:

- List 1: Three statements that define your company's goals
- List 2: Three of your own values or approaches that you've advocated strongly for at work
- List 3: A list where you work on connecting your values and approaches to your company's goals (each item on this list should clearly describe how your approach or value supports company goals)
  - For example, if you want to advocate for a new piece of software and your company's main goal is increasing revenue, think of reasons why the software will ultimately increase revenue. If you want to advocate for more inclusive hiring, think of reasons why this will ultimately increase revenue. And so on.
  - You can draw on this list whenever you're making a case for your own values or methods at work in the future.

After you've completed your third list, take 10 minutes and select a few Circle members who will practice saying out loud how an approach they're advocating for supports company goals.

**"I have been told I've been too assertive more than once. A time that sticks out to me is when I was serving as president of a committee for a major corporation. One of the staff at the corporation told me that I was being too assertive. I really had to go back and say to the person, 'My role on this committee is to be an advocate for people with disabilities. If the company expects something different, please let me know.'"**

Nadia Mossburg, senior manager, public sector, Florida, USA  
(she/her)



## Activity 2: Pairing assertiveness with empathy

20 mins

Another strategy we learned to help assert ourselves successfully is pairing assertiveness with empathy and understanding. By framing your statements with empathy and incorporating your colleagues' points of view, your colleagues are more likely to feel seen and valued, making your message more likely to be heard and well received.

To practice what empathetic framing might look like, consider the following questions:

- When have you felt most seen and heard in the workplace?
- What did your colleagues or leadership team do to help you feel this way?
- How can you implement those practices in your daily interactions?

Take 10 minutes to consider your answers. Then, as a group, take 10 minutes to have each person share one strategy they've found effective for approaching their colleagues with empathy. If time allows, discuss as a group what methods you find the most effective and accessible to implement.

**“Early in my career, I didn’t know my value. When I wasn’t invited to meetings I should have been in, I’d let it go. But nowadays, I speak up. Not in a disrespectful way. But I’ll ask, ‘Okay, what happened? How did I get left out, and how can we prevent that from happening in the future?’ There’s a saying, ‘You show people how to treat you by what you allow.’ If you let them talk to you however they want, they’re going to continue doing that. So, you’ve got to get used to making a stand for yourself.”**

Gladine Frasso, regional manager, environmental health and safety, Lean In Network Leader, Virginia, USA (she/her)



## One Action

3 mins

- This week, refer back to your conversation about pairing assertiveness with empathy in activity 2.
- Consider your answer to the question, “How can you implement those practices in your daily interactions?” and find a way to incorporate your idea or a suggestion from your Circle into your work week.

**Congratulations on a great meeting!**



