

Corporate Managers' Reactions to Assertive Social Skills Exhibited by Males and Females

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ABSTRACT. While a number of investigators have suggested that assertiveness is an important interpersonal skill for both males and females in work-related settings, few studies have empirically evaluated how corporate managers react to assertiveness exhibited by others. The current study examined whether managers react differently to identical assertive responses made by females versus by males, and also compared manager reactions to several different types of verbal content in assertive responses. The procedure consisted of presenting managers with taped vignettes that showed either a male or female model handling several work-related conflicts assertively. The portrayed models were either directly assertive, assertive but moderating their assertion with an empathic comment to the antagonist in the situation, or assertive but tempering the response with a self-effacing comment. Based on interpersonal evaluation ratings completed later by the managers, self-effacing assertive models of both sexes were rated unfavorably relative to either directly assertive or empathic-assertive models. Empathic comments preceding an assertive response resulted in more favorable manager reactions on several criteria. Finally, on almost all measures, assertive behavior exhibited by females was evaluated as positively as the same behavior exhibited by males. Implications for assertive training of males and females in the business setting are considered.

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During the past decade, a great deal of psychological research attention has been directed towards assertiveness training. While some applications of this training have involved clinical populations, it is evident that the ability to effectively express one's opinions, views and feelings to others is an important social skill in many different settings and across many types of interpersonal relationships. One setting where appropriate assertion skills are especially important is the work environment.

In most business and corporate settings, situations requiring effective communication skills with others occur very frequently and are critical to the organization's overall functioning. Managers, in particular, are often called upon to outline a company's policies to their subordinates, convey performance expectations to employees, resolve work-related conflict situations involving others, commend the good performance of employees and handle problems caused by the poor performance of subordinates. In business meetings, offering one's viewpoints, suggestions and opinions to others in an effective but nonantagonistic manner is often an essential part of organizational decision-making and problem-solving processes.

Because handling interpersonal situations such as these requires that an individual be capable of asserting himself, a number of investigators have suggested the use of assertiveness training for persons in business and management settings (Galassi & Galassi, 1977; Kelly, 1981; Lange & Jakubowski, 1976; Shaw & Rutledge, 1976). Others have noted that appropriate self-assertion skill is a necessary and central component of an effective management style (Brockway, 1976; Reed, 1977).

While the ability to clearly convey opinions, requests and viewpoints to others appears critical to management effectiveness, there are several issues that merit close empirical attention before one advocates general assertiveness training for managers. Two of these issues involve evaluating the manner in which people react to assertive behavior in the work setting. The first basic issue concerns the type of assertive management style that is most likely to elicit favorable reactions from others. While most investigators have distinguished the difference between appropriate assertion and inappropriate aggressiveness (cf., Hull & Schroeder, 1979; Woolfolk & Dever, 1979), the style with which a manager conveys opinions or requests to others is likely to influence their reactions and evaluation of that manager. In general, research on assertiveness training has

focused on teaching people to express their views clearly and to communicate behavior change requests to others in a firm but nonantagonistic fashion (*direct assertiveness*). However, other investigators have suggested that assertive behavior is more effective and is responded to more positively if the individual also conveys that he or she understands and empathizes (but still may disagree) with the position of antagonist (Lange & Jakubowski, 1976; Woolfolk & Dever, 1979). This can be termed *empathic-assertive* behavior. Finally, when individuals are first placed in a supervisory-managerial position, they may assert their requests to others but in a manner that conveys discomfort or ill-ease with their new decision-making role. Persons might exhibit such *self-effacing* assertive behavior when they are anxious about providing direct behavior change requests to others and want to seem friendly, while at the same time behaving assertively. Before initiating or advocating assertiveness training in management settings, it is important to explore how people in those settings react to various types of social assertiveness. This would help to ensure that training interventions teach interpersonal skills which are likely to be functional and effective for the persons who exhibit them.

A second, and as of yet relatively unexplored issue, involves whether people react differently to assertive behavior shown by male versus female managers. Some studies have suggested that women tend to be less assertive than men, at least with respect to interactions requiring assertiveness in the work setting (Hollandsworth & Wall, 1977). As increasing numbers of women occupy management positions in many businesses, the importance of assertion training for female managers has been particularly stressed (Bass, Krussel & Alexander, 1971; Brockway, 1976; Leonard, 1978; Mullinix & Galassi, Note 1; Shaw & Rutledge, 1976). However, it has also been suggested that females may encounter unique problems and social resistances when expressing themselves assertively because assertiveness is a characteristic traditionally associated with male decision-making roles (Jakubowski, 1973; Pearlman, Coburn & Jakubowski-Spector, 1973). At least one recent study has shown that when males and females exhibit the same assertive response in social conflict situations, observers evaluate the female model in much less favorable terms than the male model who behaves identically (Kelly, Kern, Kirkley, Patterson, & Keane, 1980). An interesting question is whether this pattern is confirmed

in the business setting. Do business people react differently to the same assertive behavior when it is exhibited by females as opposed to males?

The purpose of the current study was to explore how experienced mid- to upper-level corporate managers respond to assertiveness in others. Two variables were of particular interest. Does the style of an individual's assertive expression (direct, empathic versus self-effacing) differentially influence how others react to that person? And, do managers respond differently to the business-setting assertiveness exhibited by males and females?

METHODS

Subjects

Subjects were 67 male and 38 female employees of a Fortune 500 corporation located on the east coast. Subjects occupied the following middle to upper management levels: 15 corporate officers, 12 large department heads, 25 intermediate department heads, and 32 small department heads. The mean age of all subjects was 43 years. These management staff were quite experienced, with an average of 20.3 years of business experience and 4.3 years in their current positions. Subjects were aware only that they would be participating in a study on interpersonal communication styles in the business setting.

General Method Overview

To assess reactions to assertiveness, subjects were divided into groups and were asked to listen to an autiotaped portrayal revealing employees (the tape models) handling work-related situations that require assertive behavior. While all the portrayals were of the same situations, the models' assertive style was varied across the tapes so that subjects heard models who either were directly assertive, empathic-assertive, or self-effacing-assertive. In addition, some of the tapes portrayed males as the assertive models, while in other tapes, the model being evaluated was female. After listening to the portrayed situations, subjects completed an inventory in which they described their reactions to the model they had just heard.

Procedure

Experimental materials consisted of audiotapes which portrayed either a male or female model handling four common business situations. Each tape consisted of another person (prompt voice) behaving unreasonably toward the model, and the model responding in an assertive manner. Two different males and two different females served as audiotape models. Each model made three tapes differing in their verbal content: (1) a *direct* assertive response, (2) an *empathic* statement followed by the assertive response, and (3) a *self-effacing* statement followed by the assertive response. Thus, 12 separate audiotapes were produced, with two male and two female models serving in each of the three verbal content conditions. The models were clinical psychology residents and staff familiar with the nature of assertion training. All were of approximately the same age.

When making assertive comments within each portrayed situation, the models displayed those responses which are most frequently targeted in assertion training (cf., Edelstein & Eisler, 1976; Miller & Hersen, 1973): the models responded quickly to their partner's demands or requests, they did not comply with the partner's unreasonable behavior, they elaborated their own position firmly, they requested more acceptable behavior from their partners, and they spoke in an appropriately loud and firm (but nonhostile) tone.

Each audiotape followed a standardized format and portrayed the model handling four business situations. Two situations showed the model in a supervisor role (firing an employee who has performed poorly over a number of years, and giving an employee feedback on a report that had been inadequately researched) and two situations showed the model in a supervisee role (being asked by the boss to work late in order to finish a report, and being told by the director of a meeting to vote on an issue that had not yet been adequately discussed). These four scenes were randomized within each audiotape so that no two tapes presented the business scenes in the same sequence. Each scene was introduced with a standard narrative description of the business situation. The situation always involved the model interacting with another person who delivered two prompts to which the model responded either directly with an assertive remark, with an empathic statement preceding the assertive remark, or with a self-effacing statement preceding the assertive remark.

An example of one of the scenes demonstrating a direct assertive response is:

Narration: It is 5:30 in the afternoon and your supervisor is standing before you at your office door. The supervisor has asked you to work late many times in the past in order to get a project done by the deadline. While you have agreed to work late on all these previous occasions, tonight you have made other plans. Your supervisor says to you:

Prompt Voice: I need you to work on this report tonight. It's due tomorrow.

Direct Comment: I was just leaving my office, in fact, I'm on my way to my car. I've made other plans for tonight, but I'll be glad to get to that report first thing in the morning.

Prompt Voice: I know it's late to be asking, but I'm really in a bind.

Direct Comment: Where does all the time go. It's too late to change my plans. I'll be here ready to work on it at 8:00 tomorrow morning.

For this situation in the empathic model condition, the narration and prompts were identical, but the model's responses were:

Empathic Comment: I know you're busy and this report is important to you. I've made other plans for tonight, but I'll be glad to get to that report first thing in the morning.

Empathic Comment: I know, I've been in that kind of a position before, but it's too late to change my plans. I'll be here ready to work on it at 8:00 tomorrow morning.

Finally, for this situation in the model condition portraying self-effacing verbal content, the narration and prompts were again identical, but the model's responses were:

Self-Effacing Comment: I guess I just can't work as hard as you do. I've made other plans for tonight, but I'll be glad to get to that report first thing in the morning.

Self-Effacing Comment: I hate to be so uncooperative and hard

to get along with, but it's too late to change my plans. I'll be here ready to work on it at 8:00 tomorrow morning.

The study was conducted in conference rooms at the corporation's headquarters. Subjects were randomly assigned to attend a group session, with the members of each session listening to one of the 12 audiotapes. Thus, any given subjects listened to only one audiotape which presented either a male or a female model exhibiting one of the three types of assertive behavior across all 4 situations.

Standard instructions were presented verbally and in written form. Subjects were told that they would listen to an individual handling four common business situations and would then be asked to evaluate that individual based on their careful observation of him or her in those situations. The audiotape was then presented. At the conclusion of the tape, subjects were asked to complete an inventory which had been presented to them.

Dependent Variable: The Interpersonal Evaluation Inventory

The inventory completed by each subject consisted of 28 personality items, and subjects described the stimulus model on each item. All items were anchored 7-point bipolar ratings (e.g., 1 = extremely truthful to 7 = extremely untruthful). The scoring direction for each inventory item was randomly determined so that for some items, the more desirable pole was "1" and on others it was "7." Twenty-four of the interpersonal evaluation items were adjectives which have been previously validated as sensitive to interpersonal attraction and likeability (Anderson, 1968) and which also appeared relevant to assertiveness evaluation. This portion of the inventory was identical to that used in previous research on the perception of assertiveness (Kelly et al., 1980). The adjectives were: assertive, appropriate, tactful, offensive, truthful, educated, friendly, agreeable, pleasant, considerate, flexible, open-minded, sympathetic, good-natured, fair, kind, honest, likeable, intelligent, thoughtful, attractive, socially-skilled, warm, and superior. Other items assessed the degree to which the respondent would like to work with the model on a basis as a colleague; would like to have model as a supervisor; would like to be the model's supervisor; and would consider the model for a promotion. All four of these items were also rated on 7-point scales.

RESULTS

Validation of Independent Variable Manipulation

In order to confirm the intended manipulation of the independent variables, 13 naive college students listened to all the audiotapes and classified them according to the verbal content of the assertive statements made by the model (directly assertive, empathic plus assertive, self-effacing plus assertive). The judges were also asked to identify whether the model was a male or a female. The judges correctly classified all model voices as male or female; 92 percent of all the portrayed situations were correctly assigned to their verbal content condition. Thus, the intended manipulations of the independent variables were confirmed.

Analyses

The managers' perceptions of model behavior were examined with a 3 (Verbal content: directly assertive, empathic plus assertive, self-effacing plus assertive) X 2 (sex of model) X 2 (sex of subject) analysis of variance on each of the 28 inventory items. Post-hoc mean comparisons were made with Duncan multiple comparison tests ($p < .05$).

Main effects for verbal content, model sex and subject sex. On 12 of the 28 inventory items, significant main effects were found which indicated that the type of portrayed assertive verbal content influenced the managers' evaluations of the model. Table 1 presents the means, *F*-values, and significance levels for these differences. Post-hoc comparisons revealed that the self-effacing models were perceived in a consistently less positive manner than were the directly assertive or empathic plus assertive models. Prefacing of an assertive response with a self-effacing comment was associated with lower evaluations of the model's assertiveness, truthfulness, education, fairness, intelligence, attractiveness, social skill, and superiority. Additionally, they were considered less desirable as colleagues, supervisors, or subordinates in the work setting. Subjects also reported that they would be significantly less likely to promote the self-effacing models as compared to the empathic or directly assertive models. Relative to directly assertive responses, when empathic comments preceded a model's assertive statement, it was associated with higher ratings of the model's fairness, intelligence, and an increased desirability to be supervised by that person.

No significant main effects were found for model sex; however, subject sex did result in significant differences. As can be seen in Table 1, females rated models more positively than did males on six dimensions. Female subjects considered all models to be more tactful, educated, and attractive than did male subjects. Additionally, females found the models more desirable as colleagues and subordinates, and females were reportedly more likely to promote all models than were males.

Interaction Effects. Significant interaction effects and the Duncan post-hoc comparison results are presented in Table 2. A verbal content X model sex interaction was found for only two inventory items. For the adjective "sympathetic," post-hoc comparisons revealed that self-effacing females and empathic males were perceived as significantly more sympathetic than either directly assertive females or self-effacing males. Additionally, subjects rated self-effacing males as significantly less desirable bosses than empathic males or females, self-effacing females, and directly assertive males. There was a tendency for self-effacing males to be judged as less desirable bosses than directly assertive females; however, the difference did not reach significance. With the exception of these two interactions, the results did not indicate that the assertive behavior of male and female models was evaluated differently by the managers.

No significant interactions were found for verbal content X subject sex or for model sex X subject sex. There were no significant three-way interaction effects.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study carry several implications regarding assertiveness and assertive training with management personnel. The first involves the finding that subjects reacted differently to various styles of social assertiveness, while the second concerns the fact that assertive behavior was evaluated comparably for both male and female models.

Management and supervisory roles often carry with them the responsibility for handling interpersonal "problems" of various kinds. Solving difficulties that arise in the work setting may require that a manager assert his or her expectations, viewpoints or opinions, both to subordinates (as in the case of handling an employee's inadequate job performance) and to superiors (as in offering one's opinion at a business conference). While the importance of asser-

The entire interaction significance level is presented. Means with different superscripts were found to differ significantly ($p < .05$) from others in the same line using Duncan's multiple comparison post-hoc tests. Only items having significant differences are shown.

Item	Overall	F	Signif.	Self-effacing Plus Assertive	Empathic Plus Assertive	Directly Assertive	Main Effect for Subject Sex
assertive	23.22	.001	.001	3.13A	4.80B	5.29B	-
truthful	5.38	.01	.01	4.88A	5.97B	5.71B	-
educated	3.54	.05	.05	4.25A	4.90B	4.80B	4.90 .05
fair	4.68	.01	.01	3.72A	4.84B	4.29A	-
intelligent	8.78	.001	.001	3.69A	4.87B	4.27C	-
attractive	10.75	.001	.001	3.06A	3.94B	3.88	5.07 .05
socially-	5.86	.01	.01	3.34A	4.58B	4.17B	-
skilled	43.51	.001	.001	2.34A	4.61B	4.61B	-
tactful	15.15	.001	.001	2.72A	4.29B	4.12B	5.95 .05
enjoy as colleague	3.69	.05	.05	2.56A	3.81B	3.30A	4.11 .05
enjoy as supervisor	22.28	.001	.001	2.88A	4.42B	4.42B	3.61 .05
subordinate	17.55	.001	.001	2.31A	4.10B	3.71B	4.87 .05
promote person	3.76	.01	.01	8.07 .01	3.19	3.19	3.76

All items were scored such that higher scores are indicative of higher evaluations on the item. Means with different superscripts differ significantly ($p < .05$) from other means in the same horizontal line using Duncan's multiple comparison post-hoc tests. Only items yielding significant differences are shown.

Table 2
Post-hoc Mean Comparisons of Significant Interaction Effects^a
Verbal Content X Model Sex Interaction

Item	Overall	F-Value	Signif. Level	Self-Effac. Male	Self-Effac. Female	Emp. Male	Emp. Female	Dir. Assert. Male	Dir. Assert. Female
Sympathetic	3.96	.05	.05	3.1A	4.6B	4.6B	4.0A,B	3.6A,B	3.0A
Enjoy as Supervisor	3.20	.05	.05	2.0A	3.5B	3.9B	3.7B	3.5B	3.1A,B

Means and Significant Differences for Main Effects
Main Effects for Verbal Content

Table 1

tiveness in such work situations has been previously noted (Brockway, 1976; Reed, 1977), the current study indicates that *how* an individual expresses feelings or views to others will influence their reactions to him or her.

Self-effacement, or the strategy of apologizing before asserting, resulted in consistently negative evaluations by subjects in this study. Yet self-effacement when making behavior change requests may well be a very common style of assertiveness, especially for inexperienced managers who find it difficult to assert themselves and therefore seek to apologize for "having" to be assertive with others. Rather than improving one's likeability, making these comments when behaving assertively elicited very negative evaluations by the corporate employee subjects.

On the other hand, assertive behavior tempered with empathic comments that convey an understanding or appreciation for the other party's position were viewed quite positively. On nearly every dimension, empathic assertiveness was evaluated more favorably than self-effacing assertion; on some measures (such as fairness, intelligence and desirability as a supervisor), empathic assertion elicited more positive evaluation than directly assertive behavior.

Taken together, these findings suggest that in situations requiring assertive behavior, management personnel can be perceived to be more effective by developing the skills to (1) convey their own views, feelings and requests in a clear but nonantagonistic manner, (2) verbally communicate recognition and appreciation for the other party's position, and (3) avoid "undercutting" one's own need to behave assertively by making self-effacing or self-subordinative comments. While this style for handling situations that require assertiveness can be taught behaviorally to managers who lack effective assertive skills (Leonard, 1978; Shaw & Ruitledge, 1976), it is possible that persons who are overly self-effacing or apologetic when acting assertively will require special attention to decrease behaviors that may lead them to feel that expressing one's views or requests is a cause for apology.

The current study found that assertive males and assertive females were each viewed as comparably likeable, socially skilled and interpersonally effective. This pattern is in contrast to the results of other research which has found that college students report as much *less* likeable the behavior of assertive females relative to the same behavior in males (Kelly et al., 1980). It also runs contrary to what one would expect from research on sex role stereotypes, in

which females' use of traditionally "masculine" forcefulness might seem more likely to elicit negative reactions from others. One explanation for the current findings may involve the nature of the subject population (corporate managers as opposed to college students), the situations in which assertive models were portrayed (work-related rather than everyday situations) and the demand characteristics operating in the business setting. Presumably, successful corporate managers value persons who exhibit high task performance; effective, forthright and clear communication during business-related interactions; and the skill to behave forcefully with others when forcefulness is needed. Behaving in leadership fashion involves asserting one's own opinions and requests, and the situations portrayed in the audiotapes clearly required these competencies. If this is the case, the functional importance of using effective assertion skills may have been more relevant to the managers than the possibility that assertive females were behaving in a manner inconsistent with prevalent sex role stereotypes.

Interestingly, some studies with management populations have reported similar findings. For example, Rosen and Jerdee (1975) found that portrayed females who behaved in a dominant and direct manner when dealing with a grievance were rated more positively by managers than females who exhibited a deferent, pleading and traditionally feminine-typed style. Schein (1972) also reported that experienced managers were less susceptible to sex role stereotyped expectations about women than were inexperienced managers. One might speculate that as managers become more experienced, they place greater importance on an individual's ability to exhibit appropriate assertive skills in the work setting and attribute less importance to the sex of the person using those skills. This suggests that assertive training may not only help currently unassertive women become more effective managers, but also suggests that women's use of these skills need not result in differentially negative evaluation by others in the work setting.

In this study, managers listened to audiotaped portrayals of assertive models handling work-related situations. While this general procedure has been used in other research on assertiveness perception (cf. Hull & Schroeder, 1979; Kelly et al., 1980), it is subject to several limitations. Observers did not have access to nonverbal aspects of the model's communication style such as eye contact, posture or facial expressions, all of which can also influence social perception. In addition, subjects listened to, but did not themselves

directly interact, with the models. Thus, it was their descriptions, rather than their behavioral responses, which were assessed here. Further research is needed to determine how employees respond to different types of in vivo assertive behavior in various situational contexts. It would be especially useful to assess changes in co-worker attitudes towards male and female managers who receive actual assertive training.

Finally, assertiveness is a skill not limited to handling the unreasonable or unacceptable behavior of others. The ability to warmly commend the positive actions of colleagues or subordinates, effective listening skills and conflict resolution capabilities are other social competencies of importance in the work setting. Further attention to the assessment and training of these important skills among managers also merits research attention.

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