How to make assertiveness work for you

Lean In Circle Discussion Guide for Asian Women
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**Meeting agenda** [approx 80 mins]

- **Member updates** 15 mins
- **Watch video** 6 mins
- **Icebreaker** 20 mins

**Activities**

- **Activity 1: Identifying shared goals** 20 mins
- **Activity 2: Pairing assertiveness with empathy** 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 icebreaker
- Spend 15 mins on Activity 1 and Activity 2
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  20 mins

- Due to stereotypes about Asian women, we’re more likely than most to be criticized for acting too assertively—or not assertive enough. To get a sense of how common these experiences are within your Circle, take a few minutes to read the following list of adjectives below.

- 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
  - Too nice
  - Too quiet
  - Lacking confidence
  - Needing to speak up more
  - Raise your hand if you’ve ever held back on sharing your opinion because you feared being seen as difficult.

- Go around your Circle and have each member share one of these experiences and how they dealt with it. (15 minutes or less)
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 you’re advocating for supports company goals.

“For Asian women, generally speaking, it's not so easy to be assertive. I’ve realized that it’s important to listen, because if I am not listening to the other person, I can guarantee you that person is not listening to me. Being assertive is not about just telling the other person what you want. It’s being kind, but firm.”

Di Hu, VP, education administration, Lean In Network Leader, Washington, DC, USA (she/her)
Activity 2: Pairing assertiveness with empathy

Assertive leadership can be a difficult tightrope to walk as an Asian woman, as we are more likely than others to be the only person with our identity in the room. This can mean we face extra scrutiny for our demeanor and leadership style. This makes it harder to establish common ground in situations where opinions conflict. But when disagreements arise at work, it’s all the more important to build trust and empathy.

Framing difficult conversations with empathy is more likely to build understanding between you and your colleagues, and provides the opportunity to model empathetic behavior in the workplace.

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

- When have you felt most empathetically seen and heard by others in the workplace?
- What did your colleagues or leadership team do to help you feel this way?
- By contrast, have there been times at work when you felt invisible to others, or felt visible to others in the wrong way—for example, times when you were misjudged? What would you have liked colleagues to do differently in those scenarios?
- Based on this discussion, come up with some best practices for showing empathy to colleagues when you’re speaking up about an issue or offering difficult feedback.
Activity 2: Pairing assertiveness with empathy 20 mins

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.

“There have been so many instances when I have been criticized or I have been called too assertive. I have been called bossy, or I've been called aggressive whenever I've tried to speak my mind or assert a valid point. In fact, I've also been labeled ambitious in a negative way. In response, I learned to stand firm and not be ashamed to speak up. I would remind myself that wanting to climb the career ladder or speaking up when something is wrong are not signs of bossiness. In fact, I feel they are signs of positive assertiveness.”

Sangita Marda Agarwal, co-founder, communications firm, Lean In Network Leader, India (she/her)
We recommend you close every meeting by committing to a “One Action”—one concrete thing you’re going to do before your next Circle meeting to step outside your comfort zone or practice a new skill.

- 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!