How to make assertiveness work for you

Lean In Circle Discussion Guide for Women with Disabilities
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

● As you may know, women with disabilities can be more likely to face extra scrutiny or hear uncalled-for comments on how we show up at work. 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
  ○ Emotional
  ○ Strident
  ○ Angry
  ○ Too nice
  ○ 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.

“I have been told that I've been too assertive more than once. A time that sticks out to me is when I was serving as president of a Disability Advisory Committee for a major US corporation. I was told by one of the staff at the corporation 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

Assertive leadership can be a difficult tightrope to walk as a woman with a disability, as we are more likely than others to be the only person with our identity in the room. If others are aware of our disabilities, this can mean we face extra scrutiny for our demeanor and leadership style. But when disagreements arise at work, it’s all the more important to build trust and empathy.

It’s also helpful to pair assertiveness with 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.

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.
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!