

Aligned Assertive Communication

Communicate Effectively and Efficiently: Aligned Assertive Communication

We've seen it (and participated in it) many times: We're discussing something important and suddenly people are getting excited, raising voices, dropping out or going at it aggressively. Any hope of a solution disappears. People dig in, quit listening, and slug it out verbally. What's happening? How do we prevent these damaging exchanges?

What's happening in Conflict? William Bridges' Change Model

Organizational psychologist, William Bridges, analyzed this situation in his change model. He observed the first thing we may do in a tense, negative, or threatening situation is **deny** the problem – **flight**. We may drop out of the conversation, ignore the problem, or hope it goes away. We may deny anything is really happening.

At some point, we can no longer ignore the situation. It has become too heated, visible or impactful. Typically we move to a **resistant** state – **fight**. Some of us enter this state immediately, skipping denial. Humans do not like to change, no matter what we may think about our own adaptability. When people are resisting, we mistakenly try harder to convince them. We fall into this trap easily and marshal more arguments. We are determined to convince the other person of our correct view. We prolong conflict because both of us are resisting, locked into a death spiral going around and around.

William Bridges found the key was to help people move from Resistance by asking questions or saying things to get the person thinking. You cannot MAKE someone stop resisting. You CAN encourage them by stimulating their curiosity. Just as humans are resistant to change, we are infinitely curious and hard wired to answer questions. This is the state of **Exploration**, also called the "Neutral Zone." Here we move into more neutral territory where real dialogue, discussion, and passionate debate can take place.

Once we are actively exploring, we naturally move toward the **Acceptance** state. Help people reach the Exploration state and most of the time you will resolve the conflict and reach mutual Acceptance.

Denial →	Resistance →	Exploration →	Acceptance →
Person does not acknowledge the situation or hopes it goes away	Person actively resists	Person actively considers alternatives, solutions	Person embraces the solution
We provide facts	We ask questions, stimulate thinking, imagination	We engage in dialogue	We work productively with person

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Is this resistance inevitable?

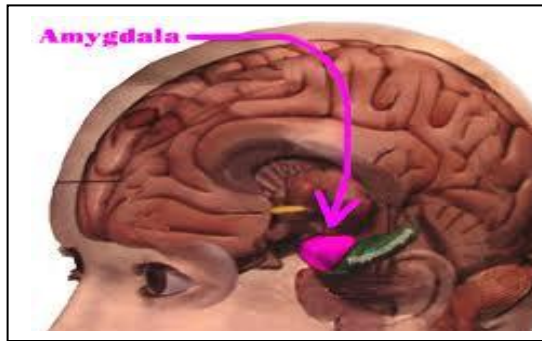
Unfortunately, resistance is inevitable. It does *not* have to be nonproductive. When Bridges described the resistance cycle and how to get out of it into useful, productive problem solving, he described the visible result of activity deep within the human brain.

Conflict and the Amygdala

Conflict is a natural part of communication especially during change. As you work with others, conflict arises because people care about results and want to influence them.

Conflict is neither to be feared nor avoided. Our job is to manage conflict in a productive, proactive way, resolve conflict where possible, and create a resolution everyone commits to carrying out. None of us meets this challenge every time.

The **amygdala**, a part of the brain, intercepts incoming messages from our five senses, scanning for threats. The amygdala *cannot discriminate* and can interpret even simple statements as *dangerous*. Most adults ignore these extreme reactions and have developed strong neural pathways to the **cerebrum**, the thinking part of the brain. We may react unconsciously to the **fight or flight** message. Some refer to the amygdala as the “lizard brain.”



The amygdala receives messages from our environment long before we are aware of them. Because it controls the autonomic (automatic) nervous system, it sends messages to prepare us for fight or flight. The signals tell the adrenal glands to pump adrenalin into the blood stream to give us that extra boost. Our heart beats faster and blood is diverted from the brain and stomach into our arms and legs. We may experience a racing heart, stomach cramp, shallow breathing, or other feelings we interpret as excitement, anxiety, or awareness. This is the fight or flight response that saves our lives in dangerous situations.

The amygdala interprets a car about to crash into us and someone saying something we don't like about the same. When we react to the amygdala signals in a non-life threatening situation – when we “lose it” – we can experience an *amygdala hijacking* and use the least developed parts of our healthy communication skills. When the reaction is extreme, we say, “I don't know what got into me. I'm usually not like that.”

Bridges meets the Amygdala

As we engage in any discussion and become more involved, the amygdala can become engaged. If the flight response dominates, we are in the Denial state. When the fight response dominates, we move into the Resistance state. To get out of the grip of the amygdala, we must *consciously* move into our “thinking” brain and use the questioning and calm approach of Exploration so we can resolve things in Acceptance.

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How do we get out of the grip of Amygdala Fight or Flight?

You must make a *conscious decision* to move out of the fight or flight state. Most of us know some common techniques to reverse the amygdala's directives; take a few deep breaths to calm the heart and force oxygen into the blood stream; count to 10, to force us into the thinking part of the brain; move physically to interrupt the pattern; laugh and release counteracting endorphins. *Act intentionally* to change the physiological and social dynamics.

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Our basic instincts are to prepare for **Fight**, the **Aggressive** response or **Flight**, the **Passive** response. Sometimes we combine both into the **Passive Aggressive** response. Productive communication is thwarted in these reactive, emotional states. The secret to good communication is to convert the Aggressive response into an **Assertive** one and the Passive response into an **Aligned** one. **Aligned Assertive** communication promotes dialogue and problem solving as you move from amygdala to cerebrum, the thinking brain.

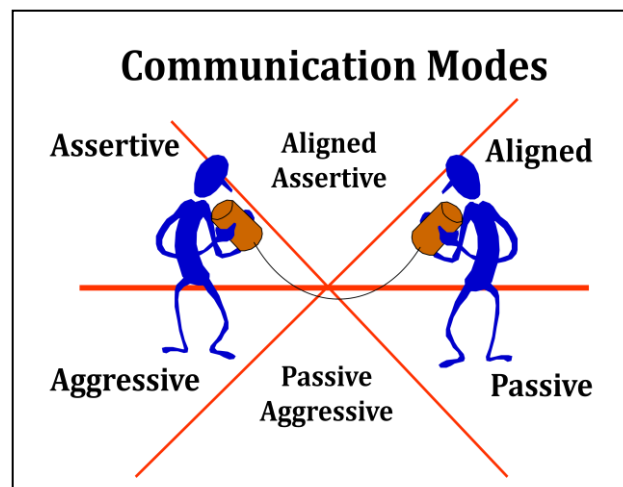
Assertive Communication: Clearly state, in a simple, unemotional way, what is expected; invite listening objectively; use statements of facts; use neutral, relaxed, and pleasant tone and stance; allow NO attacks. (Beware of jokes, which are often passive aggressive.)

Aligned Communication: Demonstrate understanding and empathy with the other person; identify with issues, person; invite open expression by the other person.

Aligned Assertive Communication: Combine both modes for greater effectiveness.

Some guidelines for success:

- Calm your own emotions first.
- Have the *intent* to come to a mutual agreement and solution.
- Ask questions to promote dialogue and de-escalate resistance.
- Use "we, us, our" and inclusive language
- Use conditional language; could, would.
- When combining aligned and assertive statements, use AND not But. (But negates what precedes it.)
- Use neutral or pleasant tone and relaxed body language.
- Be truthful and sincere. [Don't say you understand or agree if you don't.]



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Examples of Aligned Assertive statements and questions:

Assertive statements and questions:

- What could we do differently?
- Could/would you expand your idea and be more specific?
- How could we (would you) handle this situation?
 - What might the consequences be?
 - How could (would) people who are affected or involved respond?
- What could we do to make it more...

interesting	successful	useful
palatable	creative	practical
robust	viable	???
- What are your expectations of me or this....meeting, project, task, activity?
- What do you think, feel, believe, want, need....?
- What steps do you wish to take? ...could we take?
 - How can I help?
 - What do you need from me?
 - What's the rationale?
 - Help me understand how that fits with our...mission, goals, objectives, strategies, plans, agenda.
- Could you give me a specific example?
- I'm not following you; please walk me through it again.
- Where are the facts?
 - How could we get more information? Are there other sources of information?
 - Is that the only interpretation of the facts?
 - Could we recheck the information or verify it independently?
- Let's give the other team members a chance to...
- Could we table this? Put it on the next agenda? Come back to it at a (specific) later time? Talk about it off line first?
- Shall (could) we reexamine our...mission, goals, objectives, strategies, plans, agenda?
- What do you think others could (would) say or do? How could (would) they react?
- What are the risks? Downsides? Potential problems?
- Let's look at the positive side. What are the benefits? Advantages? Potential savings?
- What part do you want to play? Would you be willing to...? Could you...?
- Is this in line with the rules we agreed to follow? Do we need to change the rules?
- If we could achieve this what could (would) happen? What will it take to make it work? How can we make it work? What are you willing to do to make it work?

Aligned statements to combine with assertive statements or questions:

- I understand...how you feel; your point;, why you think or feel that; why you're responding that way...AND...
- I agree, that is an issue...I've had a similar experience myself...AND...

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Client examples:

Here are samples of specific aligned assertive statements generated by clients. Add your own for your specific needs. (Note some may fit in more than one category.)

Aligned Assertive Statements and Questions

- I understand this product concept is important to you. Help me understand its market potential.
- I appreciate your passion for this idea. Help me understand how it would work.
- I understand you think it's important to get the configuration to the field. Can you explain what the benefits are?
- I understand you want to engage in the process earlier. Can you explain to me what that would look like?
- I appreciate what you are saying. I appreciate you comment. Help me understand how it applies.
- If I understand you, putting time limits on our discussions of vision and mission will allow us to cover all the planned material.

Aligned Statements and Questions

- I understand your point of view
- Thank you for sharing
- Looking forward to our coffee tomorrow; Looking forward to discussing further
- We support your idea
- Your point is valid and my point will complement it
- I acknowledge you are worried and... It sounds like you're upset...Are you upset? Can we talk?
- I am sorry you feel that way and...
- Let's agree to disagree

Assertive Statements and Questions

- This is an assertive statement
- Let me see if I understand this... I think you are saying...So what you meant is... Just to recap...Following our conversation, we agree on... Can we go through it again? (Repeat to gain clarity; maybe in a slightly different way)
- I'm sure we can attain our goal together. Could we see how it fits into our goals and objectives? How does this align with our scope/mission? Will Y help reach goal?
- Help me understand...Help me understand your perspective on the objective. I would like to entertain your perceptions on this so I can understand.
- How do you understand it? What do you think? Could you please explain to me your thought process on this? What did you base your opinion/decision on?
- Can we put this on hold?
- We would like to bring X within our revenue target
- Data are crucial to align strategy

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- Could we do it? How could we do this better? How could we improve this? What can we do differently? Are there alternatives? What other opinions should we consider?
- What are the challenges? How could we handle it? How do we overcome...? Are you discounting Z? How do you think we can resolve it?
- Let's discuss what the impact is to others and yourself. What are the consequences?
- Can we focus on the solution? Could we describe the solution?
- What would you recommend? What are your ideas and suggestions?
- What are your priorities? How important is it? That's important because? Why? What are your "must-have" requirements? Could we determine what points are important? What can we do first?
- Could you give us an example of it?
- Expand on this further. Let's play that out...Let's see where that takes us.
- Let me know your concerns. How can we address your concerns?

Moving forward

The aligned assertive approach requires determination and practice to implement consistently. There will always be moments when you fall into old fight or flight patterns. Analyze what set you off, what "pushed your buttons," so you can be more aware the next time the situation arises. Write out your questions ahead of time before an important meeting to help you master the technique more quickly. And don't forget the old standbys of taking a deep breath and counting to 10! Enjoy practicing this dynamic and fruitful style of communication. Share your results with others and encourage them.

References for William Bridges: Although published in the 1990s, these are still relevant and useful: *Transitions*, 1980, and *Managing Transitions*, 1991 (published by Addison-Wesley); *Surviving Corporate Transition*, 1993 and *The Human Side of Organizational Change*, 1995 (published by William Bridges Associates,)

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