

# How to feel ASSERTIVE

Communication coach, speaker and author Amy Carroll reveals how to project confidence at work to help combat ageism so you can be taken seriously and stay at the top of your game.

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**W**hen entering my 50s, even before letting my chocolate brown hair turn to an exquisite silver/white (and yes, I swear by purple shampoo!), the craziest thing happened to me: I became invisible. The most classic example was waiting in any queue. I remember being at the Apple store in Grand Central station in Manhattan. The Apple employee was meticulously monitoring the flow of traffic. I was next in line with two young guys behind me when she looked over my head and said to the Gen Zers “please go right ahead”. I was gobsmacked!

We’re living in a world full of “isms”, one of them being ageism, which starts to affect women before it does men. If you’ve already started to experience this for yourself, you’ll know it can take a toll on your confidence, self-esteem and energy, and can cause a build-up of resentment. And when these sentiments leak out, they can be explosive and damaging.

In the workplace, they may manifest as feeling less relevant, pushed aside, or even pushed out, and negatively impact the way you interact with bosses, colleagues or newcomers. If you want to mitigate being overlooked, much of the magic is in how you show up. Being assertive is a core communication skill, which can help you express yourself effectively and stand up for your point of view, all while respecting the rights and beliefs of others. Here are five ways to appear more assertive, share your wisdom and positively influence the outcome, which, when applied to typical scenarios and challenges in the workplace, will help you to be taken seriously and stay at the top of your game...

*‘Ageism affects women before it does men, and can cause resentment’*

# 1

## KEEP YOUR ENERGY HIGH

For better or worse, energy is contagious. Your energy will determine how others respond to you, help you get noticed and keep the focus on you. You can help do this by employing the following tactics...

- **Maintain eye contact.** This shows respect for others and confidence in yourself (but do adjust according to culture).
- **Smile softly.** A gentle smile, whether you or others are talking, projects warmth, safety, ease, approachability, and an “all is well” vibe. If you lose your cool, for example, you may gain a reputation for aggressiveness or instability. A smile after delivering something negative or after getting wound up, may help appease the situation.
- **Speak up.** Talk at a volume that’s not shouty but also not a whisper – this communicates confidence to others.
- **Use vocal variation.** Avoid speaking in a monotone way. Varying your pitch, as if singing a song, will help you maintain interest and keep others engaged.
- **Use clear gestures.** The right physical gestures help your thought process and support the message being delivered. Make sure they’re not threatening but are emphasising your words.



# 2

## STAY CONCISE

Avoid repetition and adding in too many details. Most people don’t want or need to know about every tiny detail of a previous conversation or event, or what so and so said, they just need to know the top-line information – especially managers. Going on too much and into too much detail can make you look whiny and a nitpicker. The more concise you can be when speaking to others, the more impact and gravitas you’ll have, especially when combined with the rest of these tips.

# 3

## PAUSE FREQUENTLY

Aim to pause every 5-7 words, as this gives the perception of short, digestible sentences that the person or people to whom you’re speaking can more easily take in. If this feels too frequent, and like you’re stopping too much, simply aim to slow down and pause for effect a few times during your conversation.

# 4

## APPLY ACTIVE LISTENING

This means using short verbal and nonverbal acknowledgements while the other person is speaking. When they pause, briefly summarise what you heard. Bonus: allow yourself to be interrupted (yes you want to be interrupted), as this reduces the likelihood of conflict and keeps others more engaged.

# 5

## USE DOWNWARD INFLECTION

Finishing every phrase as if it’s the end of your thought communicates to others ‘I know what I’m talking about’. If you use upward inflection, it connotes being unsure of yourself, as if you’re still figuring things out, which may be the case but won’t help you come across with authority and confidence.





## How to win over your boss!

Here's an example of applying all five behaviours in a conversation requesting a promotion/new role with your boss. Let's assume you've prepared in advance what you want to say, so now you want to approach the situation feeling confident and that you have the right to speak your truth and ask for what you want.

With good eye contact and a warm smile, say: 'Hi (use their name, then pause), thanks for agreeing to talk to me about this promotion/new role (use vocal variation to sound engaging). Is this time still good for you?' Asking this shows you know they're busy and it's important to be flexible. Also use a downward inflection. Then depending on their response say: 'Great thanks! (or) 'No problem, when is a better

time to speak?' Assuming you continue with the conversation, say: 'I'd like to pitch the reasons why I'm an excellent candidate for this role (pause, vocal variation, warm smile, eye contact). Would you be open to hearing the specifics of what I can bring?' Make sure to ask the question with a downward inflection, then pause.

Assuming they are still agreeable, continue to list your relevant qualities and include concrete evidence of successes as well as what you've learned from past failures. Examples could be experience of the company, nuances of company politics, your positive attitude and high energy, eagerness to continue learning and growing, being team oriented, etc.

After listing your reasons, say: 'For these reasons (name), I feel strongly

that I'm a great fit for this role and am eager to embrace the learning curve. What are your thoughts?' Ask this question again with a downward inflection, vocal variation, a warm smile and eye contact.

Maintaining the smile, hold silence no matter how long it takes them to respond. Do not say anything else, even if you've forgotten something you wanted to include. When they finally respond, use active listening and summarising to check what you heard. If they give a positive reply, ask: 'What do you suggest are the next steps?' And if a negative reply, ask: 'In your opinion, what needs to happen for me to be a viable candidate?' Listen to the feedback and stay positive, even if inside you're upset. This shows you can accept constructive criticism.

## Amy's 3 tips for better communication at work

**1** When dealing with a micro-manager, put your ego to one side and let them speak (use lots of active-listening and reflect back what you heard them say). Resist interrupting and be sure to use the confidence-inducing downward inflection when you respond.

**2** Pretend not to notice when co-workers or stakeholders are being difficult. Instead, continue to interact with them as if they're being reasonable. This will feel impossible to do at first, I know! Practise suppressing your reactions. They're expecting you to react defensively, so when you don't, this will destabilise them and make them want to recalibrate to more appropriate behaviour.

**3** Practise a downward inflection for 3-5 minutes a day in low-stress situations. Within eight weeks, you'll start to see results and people taking you more seriously. Try it by taking a newspaper or book and reading each sentence, pausing every few words and using a downward inflection. What you're doing is playing a trick on your brain by telling yourself that every time you pause it's the end of the sentence, even though it's not. Here's an example: 'One of the most powerful vocal indicators ↓ (pause) that can sabotage ↓ (pause) our perceived credibility ↓ (pause) is when we speak ↓ (pause) using an upward inflection ↓ (pause) at the end of our sentences ↓.'

This sentence is chopped into six mini sentences. The point is not to speak like this all the time, or you'll sound strange, but to get used to exaggerating the skill to eventually integrate it into your daily speech.

Another trick is that with two syllable words, like "party", go up on the first syllable and down on the second: 'I'm going to the par ↑ ty.' If all else fails, embody your inner 007 and say with confidence: 'My name is Bond ↓ (pause) James Bond ↓'. Obviously practise using your own name, otherwise people will think you have an identity issue!

For most of us, it's almost impossible to hear when we're doing the upward inflection ourselves. I recommend you audio record yourself using a smartphone app, both during practice and in regular conversations. This will help you begin to make the distinction between when you are doing the upward inflection and the downward inflection.



Find a video all about language and the upward inflection at [carrollcoaching.com/mastering-the-downward-inflection](http://carrollcoaching.com/mastering-the-downward-inflection).



For more about Amy and her leadership programmes, visit [carrollcoaching.com](http://carrollcoaching.com) where you can listen to an example of the upward and downward inflection.

Her book *The Ego Tango: Discover The 7 Partner Mindset Techniques To Get More Of What You Want More Often With Less Hassle* (£8.95, Green Apple Publishing) is out now. Find out more by scanning the QR code.

