

**ARTICLE**

# Interpersonal assertiveness: Inside the balancing act

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Email: daniel.ames@gsb.columbia.edu**Abstract**

Whether in everyday disagreements, bargaining episodes, or high-stakes disputes, people typically see a spectrum of possible responses to dealing with differences with others, ranging from avoidance and accommodation to competition and aggression. We believe people judge their own and others' behaviors along this dimension, which we call interpersonal assertiveness, reflecting the degree to which someone stands up and speaks out for their own positions when they are faced with someone else who does not want the same outcomes. In this article, we review long-standing and recent scholarship to characterize the curvilinear consequences of assertiveness (both "too little" and "too much" can be problematic). We consider the sources of accommodating and assertive behavior, such as motivations, expectancies, and failures of self-regulation. We also examine ways in which people can assert themselves effectively, ranging from making precise offers in negotiations to employing rationales as part of their proposals. We conclude by noting promising directions for future research.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Countless times each day, most of us are reminded that the people around us do not seek the same outcomes we do. We hope to vacation at the beach, but our families or friends want to head for the mountains. We want to fall asleep, but our neighbors hope their loud party lasts deep into the night. We seek a raise, a promotion, or a budget increase, but our colleagues and bosses have other plans. Because the people around us do not always want what we do, we repeatedly face a basic question of social life: How hard, and how, should we push to get our way? We can press forcefully for our ideal outcomes and resist giving in. We can consider creative solutions or cede selected ground. We can capitulate entirely or even duck and run. Answers to the question of "How hard should I push" vary in a variety of ways, but our focus here is on the dimension we call *interpersonal assertiveness*, the degree to which people speak out and stand up for their own interests when they are not perfectly aligned with others'. We take a folk psychological approach to this construct, believing that both actors and observers tend to agree in placing behavioral

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responses to divergent interests on a spectrum ranging from avoidance and passivity to competition and aggression (cf. Ames, 2009; Ames & Flynn, 2007).

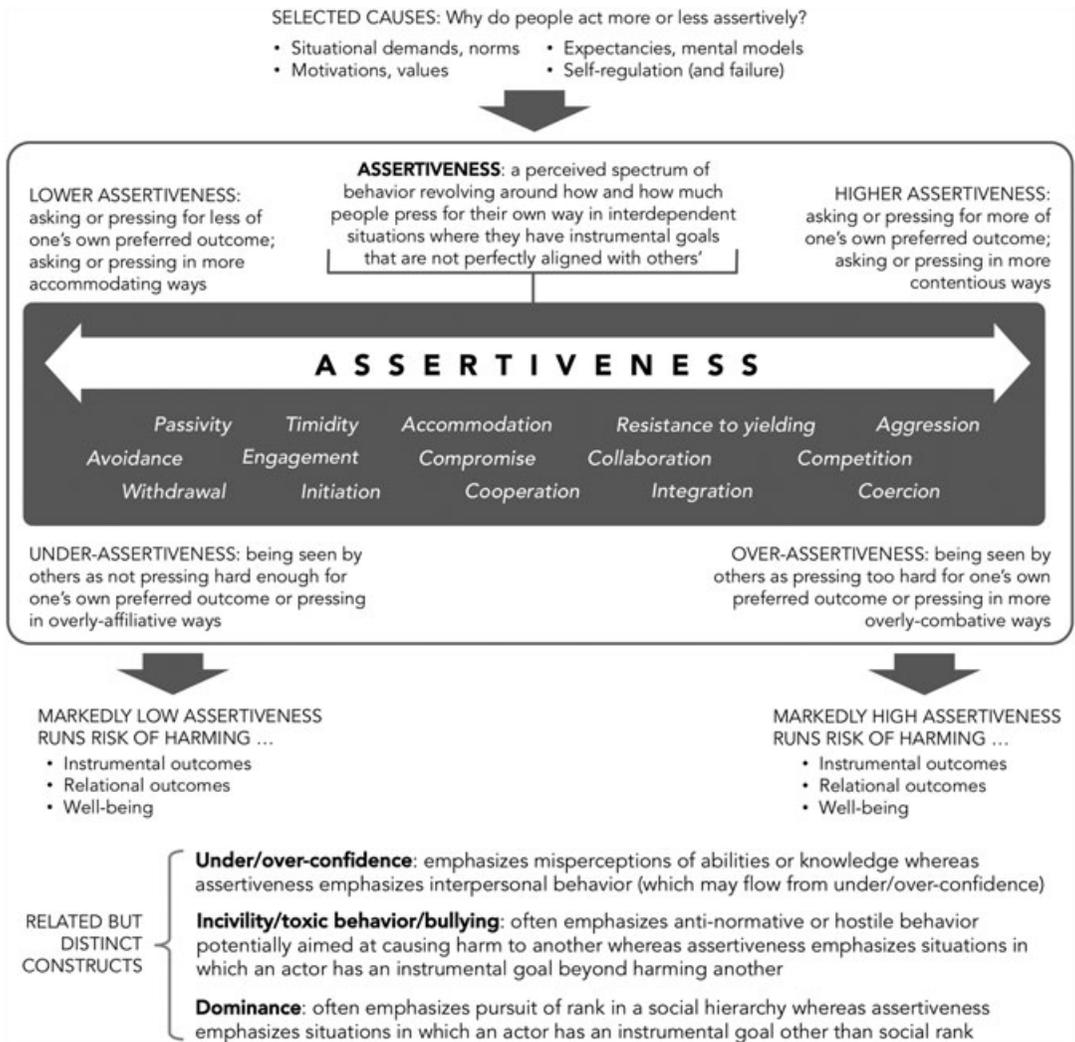
Whether in high-stakes disputes, formal or informal negotiations, or everyday disagreements, our assertiveness affects our outcomes. Getting assertiveness “wrong” in a particular episode, or chronically, risks costly consequences. When we push too hard, or in an ineffective way, our counterparts may resist giving us the material outcomes we want or our relationships might fray. When we do not push hard enough, we fail to have our own needs met and risk undermining our own well-being. Generations of scholars, in multiple areas, have examined these dynamics in various forms, ranging from cooperative to competitive behavior and from avoidance to aggression. Work over the past decade or so—especially in the literatures on negotiation and interpersonal conflict—has revealed new insights on the impact of assertiveness as well as its sources. In this article, we draw on long-standing scholarship as well as recent work in the service of three goals: first, to characterize the consequences of interpersonal assertiveness; second, to describe the sources of assertiveness and why people might push too hard or not hard enough; and third, to identify ways in which people can assert themselves effectively. Before proceeding further, though, we clarify what we mean by assertiveness and how it relates to other constructs.

## 2 | ASSERTIVENESS AND RELATED CONSTRUCTS

Our definition of assertiveness applies to everyday perceptions that people have of behaviors in situations where someone wants something (e.g., an employee hoping for a 10% salary increase) but is at least somewhat dependent on one or more other people who have at least slightly different positions or goals (e.g., a manager who would rather not pay any more in salary). In these situations, the focal actor's behaviors vary in the *degree* to which they involve asking or pressing for more or less of one's way (e.g., the employee could ask for a 2% raise, or 10%, or 20%) and in *how* people ask for their way (e.g., she or he could present a thoughtful argument justifying a 10% increase or offer an ultimatum to quit if she or he received anything less than 10%). We believe that when people face such situations (e.g., “How should I pursue the raise I want?”), they often think about how possible behaviors vary along a spectrum of assertiveness, ranging from pressing for less and proposing terms in a more accommodating way to pressing for more and proposing terms in a more contentious way. Likewise, when people (e.g., the manager) observe others' behavior in such situations, they often evaluate those behaviors along such a dimension.

In short, we view assertiveness as a dimension in lay or folk judgments of behavior in situations where people have instrumental goals that are not perfectly aligned with others on whom they are potentially interdependent (cf. Ames & Flynn, 2007). We believe that some behaviors (e.g., avoidance and accommodation) are reliably seen as low in assertiveness whereas other behaviors (e.g., competition and aggression) are reliably seen as high in assertiveness. Likewise, people seen as reliably acting in a relatively low or high assertive way might be seen dispositionally as low or high in assertiveness. People also frequently normatively judge their own and others' behavior along this dimension as being *underassertive* or *overassertive*. Such judgments vary according to interpretations of the situation. For instance, even relatively high assertive behavior may be seen as appropriate in some contexts (e.g., threatening to walk away from a vendor while haggling in one-time interaction in a bazaar) but as overassertive in others (e.g., threatening to walk away from a well-known manager when seeking a raise).

Given this definition of assertiveness, it is apparent that many constructs from folk perceptions as well as scholarly research are relevant, ranging from conflict avoidance to cooperation to resistance to yielding (see Figure 1). A number of other constructs are related but distinct. For instance, some scholars have defined dominance as “the induction of fear, through intimidation and coercion, to attain social rank” (Cheng, Foulsham, Kingstone, & Henrich, 2013), whereas others have characterized the personality trait of dominance as “the tendency to behave in assertive, forceful, and self-assured ways” (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). This later definition overlaps to a good degree with our conception of assertiveness, but the former departs from our focus in its



**FIGURE 1** The construct of assertiveness along with selected causes and consequences

emphasis on the attainment of social rank. A number of such constructs are noted in Figure 1. Our aim in this characterization is not to argue that our folk-psychological conceptualization to assertiveness is somehow a superior construct but to detail what we mean by it and to distinguish it from other constructs. We also aim to highlight the connections to many literatures that hold lessons for the dynamics of assertive behavior—including its sources and how it is perceived.

We hasten to add that assertiveness is not relevant only to zero-sum bargaining or conflict situations (such as negotiations over price, where one side's gain corresponds perfectly to the other's loss and vice versa). Assertiveness can be a feature of behaviors in other contexts, such as favor requests or advocating for a solution to a particular problem or multi-issue negotiations with differing priorities. Our premise is not that assertiveness is only relevant when parties have perfectly opposed positions but rather that it is relevant when an actor believes someone else's positions are not perfectly aligned with her own.

It is also worth noting early on that although group behavior and intergroup conflicts are certainly important topics, they are beyond the scope of this review. Our focus here is on interactions between individuals.

### 3 | A BALANCING ACT WITH CONSEQUENTIAL ERRORS

Scholarly reviews of many topics understandably proceed from a construct's causes to its consequences. In this review of assertiveness, however, we focus first on consequences because we believe that describing them lays the groundwork for a more complete picture of the causes. As we discuss later, recent work shows that actors' *predictions* of the consequences of their low or high assertive behavior are often a source of such behavior, even when those predictions are exaggerated or wrong.

Recent scholarship has documented curvilinear effects for assertiveness in terms of outcomes. For instance, Ames and Flynn (2007) demonstrated inverted U-shaped relationships between individuals' assertiveness and others' evaluations of their leadership and management skills (see, also, Ames, 2009). Like the temperature of Goldilocks' porridge in the fairy tale, assertiveness can be too low or too high in the eyes of onlookers; most people seek, but sometimes fail, to get it just right.

Assertiveness is not alone in showing such curvilinear effects. Many dimensions of social behavior are unwelcome or maladaptive in extreme degrees (cf. Borkenau, Zaltauskas, & Leising, 2009; Grant & Schwartz, 2011). For instance, people who share very little of themselves might seem withdrawn; people who share too much can be exasperating. People who are underinclusive in their decision making can seem self-absorbed; people who are overinclusive may be seen as dithering. But if assertiveness is not distinctive in having such nonlinear effects, it may be special in the everyday frequency with which people are seen by others as striking the wrong balance. For instance, in a series of studies of professional development feedback provided by coworkers, assertiveness was the most common theme in open-ended comments (Ames & Flynn, 2007). Although the "right" amount of assertiveness was rarely mentioned as a strength, overassertiveness ("you push too hard") and underassertiveness ("you don't push hard enough") were the most frequently mentioned weaknesses, far more common than the next most prevalent themes (e.g., conscientiousness, charisma, and competence) combined. In research on dyadic negotiations, Ames and Wazlawek (2014) found that a third of negotiators said their counterpart was underassertive or overassertive—and over half thought they themselves were underassertive or overassertive.

It is not, then, that assertiveness deserves attention because it alone is a dimension of behavior that has some adaptive middle ground. Many dimensions possess that quality. Rather, it is that people are seen as straying from adaptive assertiveness with such *frequency* and potentially *costly consequences* that suggests assertiveness deserves a place on the agenda of scholars, educators, and practitioners. In the sections that follow, we take a closer look at the consequences of low and high assertiveness—and we note scholarship on how stereotypes and social categories might affect how assertiveness is perceived.

#### 3.1 | The downside of low assertiveness

Low assertiveness can take several forms that have negative consequences for actors. One is a timidity in requests or claims, including proposing solutions that are underambitious in meeting one's own needs. A large literature on anchoring effects in negotiations shows that initial proposals often exert a great pull over final outcomes (for a review, see Gunia, Swaab, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2013). The implication for low assertiveness is clear: Anemic proposals are likely to beget anemic outcomes.

Another form of low assertiveness is a readiness to accommodate counterparts' requests or impositions. Barry and Friedman (1998), for instance, showed that being anchored by a counterpart's offer in a negotiation—that is, making a more conciliatory counterproposal—was associated with worse final settlements. They also found that people high in trait Agreeableness were especially susceptible to being anchored. Some research has shown that a readiness to accommodate counterparts—sometimes framed as a low "resistance to yielding"—can lead to worse *joint* outcomes (e.g., Ames & Wazlawek, 2014; Ben-Yoav & Pruitt, 1984; Curhan, Neale, Ross, & Rosencranz-Engelmann, 2008; Gelfand, Major, Raver, Nishii, & O'Brien, 2006). This can happen when negotiating parties quickly capitulate to a "split the difference" outcome rather than work together to uncover a "grow the pie" solution that addresses

the differing priorities of the two sides. Ironically, some prosocially motivated efforts to swiftly accommodate a counterpart can end up leaving value behind for both sides. In short, individuals who readily accommodate counterpart requests often experience worse material outcomes—and at least some work suggests it may provoke workplace stress (Friedman, Tidd, Currall, & Tsai, 2000).

A third form low assertiveness can take is avoidance or noninitiation of requests, conflicts, or negotiations. Research on helping, for instance, has documented widespread and unwarranted pessimism about the likelihood of others' responding positively to one's requests for help and favors, leading many people to avoid asking for, and receiving, needed support (e.g., Bohns, 2016). Some research suggests that an avoidant conflict style is associated not only with workplace stress but also with heightened task conflict (Friedman et al., 2000)—which could stem from failing to surface and resolve differences in a timely way (cf. Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Organizational research has found that employees who are less likely to initiate negotiations are less likely to be promoted in a timely fashion (e.g., Greig, 2008). Such avoidance and consequences may be more common for women than men, a topic we examine in greater detail later.

In sum, low assertiveness can take on multiple forms, such as timid proposals to others, a readiness to accommodate others' positions, and an avoidance of making requests in the first place. All of these can lead an individual to worse material or instrumental outcomes for themselves, failing to get the resources or support they seek. Such behaviors can also undermine counterparts' outcomes, harm relationships, and lead to stress and diminished health and well-being (e.g., Aubé, 2008).

### 3.2 | The downside of high assertiveness

High levels of assertiveness can backfire in ways both obvious and less immediately apparent. One of the most obvious would be reactance, whereby a counterpart actively resists an overture or even adopts highly assertive oppositional behavior. For instance, Benton, Kelley, and Liebling (1972) found that extreme offers in a bargaining situation evoked extreme counteroffers. Elsewhere, in research on influence tactics, Falbe and Yukl (1992) showed that assertive pressure tactics evoked far greater resistance, and led to worse outcomes, than “soft” tactics such as consultation, personal appeals, and ingratiation. Other work has linked dominating conflict styles to exacerbated task conflict in the workplace (e.g., Friedman et al., 2000). In short, high levels of assertiveness can evoke opposition, thereby triggering self-reinforcing cycles of conflict escalation and interfering with desired outcomes (cf. De Dreu, 2010).

Another salient outcome of extreme assertiveness is an impasse, when a counterpart walks away or otherwise declines to agree to a solution or way forward. For instance, Pillutla and Murnighan (1996) found that highly assertive (i.e., markedly ungenerous) offers in an ultimatum context were often met with anger and rejection, even when that impasse led to an economic cost for the rejector. Elsewhere, Ames and Mason (2015) counseled some negotiators to make a meaningfully more-assertive opening offer than what they had initially planned on asking for; compared with those in a control condition, these more-assertive negotiators evoked substantially higher impasse rates. Other recent research has likewise linked extreme openings to negotiation impasses, finding that acting in a highly assertive way increases the risks of ending up with no deal (Schweinsberg, Ku, Wang, & Pillutla, 2012).

Sometimes extreme assertiveness may appear to work (e.g., yielding a seemingly attractive settlement), but the costs are less immediate or obvious. Ames and Flynn (2007), for instance, found that high levels of assertiveness in the workplace were associated with worse relationships. Such behavior can also shape reputations (e.g., Anderson & Shirako, 2008), and a reputation for being highly assertive can impact how future counterparts act and react (e.g., Tinsley, O'Connor, & Sullivan, 2002). Extreme assertiveness can plant seeds that grow into resentment and revenge. People who feel mistreated by a counterpart may subsequently seek to restore equity or balance through acts such as sabotage, retaliation, or conflict escalation (see, e.g., Kim & Smith, 1993; Walster, Walster, & Berschied, 1978; Wang, Northcraft, & Van Kleef, 2012). A bargainer's hostility may appear to beget

better terms for them initially but may damage their counterpart's trust for them and ultimately undermine the implementation of an agreement (Campagna, Mislin, Kong, & Bottom, 2016).

Stepping back, we see that, like low assertiveness, high assertiveness can jeopardize instrumental outcomes (e.g., by provoking resistance, impasses, or retaliation), can undermine relationship outcomes (e.g., by damaging trust), and can hamper well-being (e.g., by stoking stress-inducing conflicts).

### 3.3 | Social categories and stereotypes

There is ample evidence that extremes—in both aggressiveness and accommodation—carry downside risks for nearly everyone. However, what behaviors are expected, how behaviors are perceived, and the norms applied to behaviors are affected by social categories and stereotypes. A substantial number of scholars have argued that warmth (vs. hostility) is a central dimension in group stereotypes. For instance, Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu (2002) found that American perceivers tended to see some categories (e.g., housewives) as higher in warmth than others (e.g., welfare recipients). Other scholars (e.g., Devine, 1989) have noted that Americans tend to stereotype Black men as aggressive and hostile. Such beliefs shape interpretations, as highlighted in classic work showing that ambiguous shoves between people are seen as more hostile when enacted by a Black rather than White actor (Duncan, 1976; Sagar & Schofield, 1980).

An active stream of work in the negotiations literature has considered gender dynamics related to assertiveness. Women appear to face a unique dilemma: Acting assertively in pursuit of their own interests is often seen as a violation of prescriptive gender stereotypes. Whereas men may be expected to be assertive, dominant, and agentic (Bem, 1974; Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Rudman, 2010), widely shared stereotypes suggest that women should be sympathetic, accommodating, and concerned about others (Eagly, 1987; Fiske & Lee, 2008; Heilman, 2001).

When women violate these stereotypes, they often experience backlash, being judged harshly (Rudman, 1998)—often more harshly than men (Williams & Tiedens, 2016). For example, compared with men, women who initiate salary negotiations or behave in an assertive, self-promoting manner in a job interview context, are seen as overly demanding, less socially skilled, and less likeable (Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2007; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Counterparts in salary negotiations with a self-advocating female (vs. male) candidate have a lower desire for future interaction with her, socially and in the workplace (Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013a). Women who assert themselves intellectually during group discussions, speaking up and offering substantive contributions, elicit noticeable cues of negative affect from other discussants (Butler & Geis, 1990).

At the same time that assertiveness can evoke social backlash for women, it can also fail to secure instrumental gains or sought-after outcomes. Compared with men, women's abilities and competency are more often questioned (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989), their ideas and viewpoints are more frequently challenged and met with skepticism (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Brooks, Huang, Kearney, & Murray, 2014), and sometimes they are less likely to get what they ask for (Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013b).

When women do act in stereotype-consistent communal ways, their accommodations are sometimes undervalued and go unrewarded. Women are less likely than men to be recognized and rewarded for altruistic behaviors performed in the workplace (Heilman & Chen, 2005), and the value they concede in negotiation is less likely to be reciprocated by their male counterparts (Wazlawek & Stephens, 2017).

In sum, finding the right touch with assertiveness may be something of a high-stakes struggle for many people, but the challenge may be even more exacting (and exasperating) for women and members of certain stereotyped groups. We return to this topic, and possible prescriptions, later in our review.

### 3.4 | Situational factors in behavior and perceptions

Our discussion so far has, by turns, portrayed assertiveness as a dimension of behavior in a particular situation and also as a dispositional quality. It is worth stressing briefly that the implication of scholarship to date is not that the

most adaptive approach for individuals is a chronically moderate level of assertiveness across all situations. The reality is that people vary in their assertiveness across situations, although they may display stable profiles across a configuration of situations (e.g., Shoda, Mischel, & Wright, 1994). Whether and how people assert themselves—and how assertiveness is judged—depends greatly on factors such as whether a topic of conflict evokes sacred values or moral convictions (e.g., Skitka, 2010) and the stakes or criticality of the issue of disagreement (e.g., Callanan, Benzing, & Perri, 2006). Behavioral choices and perceptions also often depend on the kind of relationship a person has with their counterpart, including power differences (e.g., Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007), whether the relationship is more communal or exchange oriented (e.g., Clark, Dubash, & Mills, 1998; Fiske, 1992), and the presence of rivalry (e.g., Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010). Research suggests that people are often well served by varying their behavior to match the situation, as in trait models of leadership that describe a role for situational fit (e.g., Zaccaro, 2007). One noteworthy situational factor is counterpart assertiveness, where there may be value in taking a stronger stance when dealing with a competitive partner (e.g., Flynn & Ames, 2006).

## 4 | EXPLAINING ASSERTIVENESS: WHY PEOPLE PUSH (OR NOT)

Our examination of the consequences of assertiveness positions us to turn back to the sources of assertiveness. As we discuss, anticipated consequences can be an important driver of (un)assertive behavior, even when those forecasts are wide of the mark. We consider other sources as well, including motivations and self-regulatory failure.

### 4.1 | Motivations and values

Motivations are an important factor behind almost any interpersonal behavior. In many ways, this is the discipline's longest standing answer to the question of why some people are highly assertive or highly accommodating, tracing back to constructs such as cooperative and competitive motives (e.g., Deutsch, 1949), needs for power and affiliation (e.g., McClelland, 1987), agency and communion (e.g., Bakan, 1966), and various configurations of concerns about one's own and one's counterpart's gains (e.g., Messick & McClintock, 1968; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). In broad terms, a motivational view suggests that some people are highly assertive because they want to get their way, or “win” in some fashion, whereas others are more accommodating because they place a premium on getting along.

Scholars have harnessed individual and situational differences in such motivations and values to predict a wide variety of assertiveness-related behaviors in conflict and negotiation (for reviews, see, e.g., Carnevale & De Dreu, 2006; De Dreu, 2004). For instance, one meta-analysis of several dozen studies found that “proself” (versus prosocial) motives were associated with more contentious behavior and less problem-solving behavior (De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000). Other work has linked other-oriented motivations to greater reciprocations to counterparts and to a readiness to settle for worse outcomes for oneself (Amanatullah, Morris, & Curhan, 2008).

### 4.2 | Awareness (and lack thereof)

One image that emerges from the motivational perspective described above is of actors who knowingly and contentedly choose to act in a way that is highly assertive or accommodating, understanding the consequences and social perceptions of their behavior. In other words, a highly assertive person, for instance, appreciates that their behavior might be seen as heavy handed by a counterpart, but they act competitively nonetheless because they seek the outcomes it yields. Certainly such cases exist. And if these were the dominant circumstances surrounding assertiveness, the question of “what causes people to be more or less assertive” would be largely answered by our preceding section (i.e., different motivations and values). Yet recent research suggests self-awareness is often not the dominant condition when it comes to assertiveness, suggesting there is more behind this behavior than motivations alone. We turn next to a brief discussion of these findings about awareness, which lays the groundwork for other nonmotivational sources of assertive behavior.

Recent work highlights that a good share of people seem to be unaware of how their assertive behavior comes across to others. For instance, across a series of studies, Ames and Wazlawek (2014) asked negotiators in the wake of bargaining episodes to categorize their own behavior as underassertive, appropriately assertive, or overassertive. The negotiators similarly categorized their counterparts' behavior. Negotiators' self-categorizations matched their counterparts' categorizations of them in only 52% of cases. Across the studies, negotiators also reported their metaperceptions—that is, how a given negotiator thought her or his counterpart had categorized her behavior. Negotiators' metaperceptions matched counterpart perceptions in only 47% of cases. In other words, about half the time, negotiators failed to understand whether their counterparts saw their behavior as underassertive, appropriately assertive, or overassertive.

This disconnect likely has numerous sources, including the basic challenge of reading ambiguous and noisy counterpart reactions. In some strategic contexts, counterparts may actively attempt to mislead a counterpart about how they are coming across, such as a negotiator trying to convince a (reasonable) counterpart that they are being ungenerous (Ames & Wazlawek, 2014). Recent evidence also indicates that people may be especially unlikely to transmit information to a colleague or peer that he or she is problematically overassertive, perhaps anticipating negative reactions or a low likelihood of change (Wazlawek & Ames, 2016). As a result of this nonsignal, people may mistakenly think they have the right touch when they are widely seen as pushing too hard.

Whatever the reasons, people in conflicts and negotiations may have difficulty in gauging how their counterparts see them, and likewise, organizational members in the workplace may have a limited sense of how their assertiveness is viewed by colleagues. This lack of awareness is not, in itself, an explanation for why people act assertively or not. However, we believe it is a condition that signals that causes other than motivations may be at work, including expectancies and mental models.

### 4.3 | Expectancies and mental models

Before acting, people often imagine the outcomes of various behaviors—such as being highly assertive or accommodating—and then choose how to behave on the basis of these expectancies, regardless of whether these forecasts are correct or not. As noted earlier, people have curvilinear expectancies for the social and instrumental impacts of assertiveness, with the vast majority forecasting an inverted U-shaped relationship between increasing levels of assertiveness and outcomes (Ames, 2008). Importantly, expectations about the “optimal” level of assertiveness vary from one person to the next, and these beliefs guide behaviors in conflict and negotiations, above and beyond the impact of motivations (Ames, 2008). People who are extremely unassertive tend to be pessimistic about the consequences of assertiveness, expecting that relational and instrumental damage would accrue if they pressed hard for their way. In contrast, people who are highly assertive tend to expect assertiveness will yield many benefits and relatively few costs. Even in extreme cases of aggression, such as the use of torture to extract information from an enemy combatant, people who embrace assertiveness confidently expect that it will work—and that it may be necessary to achieve the desired results (Ames & Lee, 2015).

In short, people vary in their “assertiveness expectancies,” and these differences in perceptions can help explain their behavior. Another perceptual source of assertive behavior concerns the overall framing or mental models individuals have of conflict situations, such as the degree to which they believe dominating (vs. collaborating) with a counterpart is necessary to achieve the best outcome. Recent work has captured individual variance in these general mental models, harnessing these beliefs to predict behavior in negotiations and workplace conflicts (see Halevy & Katz, 2013, for a review).

### 4.4 | Self-regulation and emotion regulation

The portrait we have sketched thus far of assertiveness, or lack thereof, is one that features some degree of control and deliberation: People pursue valued outcomes by choosing assertive or accommodating behaviors that they think

(however misguided) will beget those outcomes. However, some behavior related to assertiveness and accommodation is less controlled, more closely resembling a failure to self-regulate than a reflective plan of action (e.g., Mischel, DeSmet, & Kross, 2006). For instance, high levels of assertiveness may stem from a failure to down-regulate anger or frustration (e.g., DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007), which may be common in cases of perceived provocation (e.g., Denson, Pedersen, Friese, Hahm, & Roberts, 2011). Displays of anger can, in turn, evoke angry and assertive responses from a counterpart, triggering an escalatory cycle (e.g., De Dreu, 2010; Van Kleef, 2009).

Low levels of assertiveness, or conflict avoidance, sometimes reflect the operation of fear or anxiety. For instance, fear of conflict has been identified as a reason why people may shy away from providing negative feedback to poor performers during performance evaluations (e.g., Waung & Highhouse, 1997). Recent work has linked anxiety in negotiation contexts to more accommodating offers and to earlier exit behaviors (Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011). Embarrassment may also play a role in (un)assertive behavior, sometimes leading to compliance (cf. Apsler, 1975). When asked for help or a favor, for instance, some people are reluctant to resist unwanted impositions because they seek to avoid embarrassing themselves or the request maker (Bohns, 2016).

Summing up, scholars have offered numerous answers to the question of why people are sometimes highly accommodating or highly assertive. In some cases, motivations to get one's way or get along account for behavior. People also vary in how optimistic they are about what will happen when they push hard or give in. And, sometimes, our aggression or avoidance reflects an inability to regulate our emotions such as anger and fear.

## 5 | SEEKING THE RIGHT TOUCH

Having characterized the challenge and sources of interpersonal assertiveness, we turn now to potential responses and good practices, beginning at the individual level.

### 5.1 | Good practices for individuals

#### 5.1.1 | Asking

Some individuals struggle to initiate difficult conversations, constructive conflicts, and negotiations (e.g., Bowles et al., 2007) or even to ask for help and support (e.g., Bohns, 2016). This reluctance can often be traced to feelings of apprehension or intimidation, including concerns about others' negative reactions and a lack of self-efficacy. As such, skills training and role-play practice can be effective in building confidence and helping to manage others' reactions (e.g., Movius, 2008). Some research suggests that framing a situation as an opportunity to "ask" rather than as a negotiation may reduce feelings of intimidation and increase the likelihood of initiation (e.g., Small, Gelfand, Babcock, & Gettman, 2007). Other work indicates that priming oneself with feelings of power may increase a readiness to negotiate (Magee et al., 2007).

#### 5.1.2 | Asking for the right amount

As noted earlier, assertive proposals can anchor a negotiation in one's favor, but beyond some threshold, overly bold offers often backfire. Pinpointing that threshold is challenging in practice and has not been the focus of much scholarship.<sup>1</sup> However, several numerical features of negotiation proposals have been addressed in recent scholarship, including offer precision. Evidence suggests that precise offers (e.g., asking \$4,985 for a used car rather than \$5,000) are more potent than round offers in anchoring a negotiation, in part because they are seen as more credible and grounded in deliberation (Loschelder, Stuppi, & Troetschel, 2013; Mason, Lee, Wiley, & Ames, 2013). It is worth noting that using a precise offer without being able to provide a compelling explanation for it risks losing credibility or even evoking backlash.

Other recent work shows that certain kinds of range offers (e.g., asking for "\$5,000 to \$5,200" rather than \$5,000 for a used car) can be effective, yielding a mix of deal term and relational benefits (Ames & Mason, 2015). This

research suggests that range offers may work best when the offer is in the region of being assertive but not unreasonable and when a counterpart is at least somewhat motivated to be polite, or at least avoid being rude.

### 5.1.3 | Asking in the right way

Scholars and practitioners have observed that the overarching account and framing of a request can shape reactions and outcomes. Many practice-oriented guides advocate the use of scripts or templates for beginning difficult conversations or conflicts (e.g., Harper, 2004; Paterson, 2000; Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Swizler, 2012). For instance, Bower and Bower's (2004) DESC script recommends that people *Describe* the situation objectively, *Express* their feelings and thoughts about the situation, *Specify* the outcome they desire, and note the *Consequences* that such behaviors will lead to.

Recent scholarship has documented the impact of various rationales that negotiators might employ in conjunction with a proposal. For instance, Lee and Ames (in press) examined disparagement rationales (e.g., when a buyer—while making an ungenerous offer—criticizes what a counterpart is selling) and constraint rationales (e.g., when a buyer—while making an ungenerous offer—notes their own limited resources). They found that disparagement rationales often evoked negative reactions and resistance, especially when sellers had some sense of the object's typical value. In contrast, constraint rationales often yielded better deal terms and more positive impressions. Other recent work shows that framing proposals to emphasize what is *offered* to a counterpart ("My X for your Y") leads to greater concessions from the counterpart than emphasizing what is *asked* from a counterpart ("Your Y for my X"), where losses may loom larger (Troetschel, Loschelder, Hoehne, & Majer, 2015).

### 5.1.4 | Conceding wisely

Some research suggests that the framing of concessions has effects on outcomes and relationships. For instance, Ward, Disston, Brenner, and Ross (2008) found that giving a counterpart credit for evoking a concession promoted more attractive deals and liking for the person offering such acknowledgement. More recently, Bhatia, Chow, and Weingart (2016) have found that emphasizing the benefits of a concession to a counterpart may help negotiators secure better deal terms while also preserving positive impressions.

### 5.1.5 | Saying "no"

A good share of people are reluctant to reject others' overtures or requests, especially when they are seen as pleas for help. As a result, many people can think of times when they said "yes" but wish they had asserted themselves and said "no." This topic has been addressed in popular books (e.g., Ury, 2007), which provide strategies that may increase a person's comfort with declining a request. Some scholarly research has examined the "agreement bias," when negotiators accept a deal that is worse than their alternative, sometimes because they feel an obligation to their current bargaining counterpart. One recent article (Cohen, Leonardelli, & Thompson, 2014) found that teaming up with others mitigated the agreement bias—suggesting that there may be value in consulting others or seeking advice before saying yes to a substantial request.

### 5.1.6 | Listening

For some people, asserting themselves revolves primarily around verbally making a case, sometimes relentlessly and forcefully, for their position. However, recent research suggests that listening can play a significant role in influencing others. Ames, Maissen, and Brockner (2012) found that listening behavior predicted influence above and beyond the impact of verbal behavior, arguing that listening yields both informational benefits (e.g., better understanding a counterpart's position and how to persuade them) and relational benefits (e.g., counterparts have more liking and trust for those who listen to them and are therefore more readily persuaded by them). As such, one approach to being effectively assertive may be not only to listen to a counterpart's perspective but also to let them feel heard.

### 5.1.7 | Prescriptions for women

Although all of the practices noted above seem equally applicable to men and women, a considerable amount of research has examined gender dynamics in assertiveness, yielding strategies that may have distinctive benefits for women asserting themselves in conflict and negotiation. One of these involves integrating displays of warmth and friendliness into assertive overtures (e.g., Diekmann, 2007; Kray, Locke, & Van Zant, 2012). This approach may reduce a counterpart's feeling of threat or the sense that a woman is violating gender roles. Overtly signaling relational concerns may also be helpful for women, such as stressing the value they place on relationships (Bowles & Babcock, 2013) and framing themselves as negotiating on behalf of others (e.g., Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013a). Women may also benefit from addressing their own cognitive barriers about their negotiation capabilities by adopting a growth mindset (see Kennedy & Kray, 2015, for further discussion of this and numerous other correctives).

## 5.2 | Beyond the individual

Beyond leaving it to individuals to grapple with assertiveness on their own, there are a number of levers available to leaders, practitioners, and others. One is to manage the climate in which conflict and assertiveness play out. Organizational cultures vary in dimensions such as the degree to which conflict is actively and agreeably pursued, creating a strong situation for individuals. Leaders can shape these cultures, consciously or unwittingly, through their own example (Gelfand, Leslie, Keller, & De Dreu, 2012). A good deal of research points to the value of creating "psychological safety" in team and organizational cultures, with norms that support open discussion of divergent viewpoints (e.g., Edmondson, 1999; Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

Organizations can also pursue training opportunities on topics including negotiations and conflict. Evidence suggests that negotiation involves skills that can be learned and that improve with training (e.g., Movius, 2008). Given the frequent lack of awareness about how one's assertiveness is perceived, and the apparent reluctance of colleagues to give coworkers spontaneous feedback about overassertiveness, organizations might also embrace formal and informal feedback processes that deliver explicit information to individuals about how their assertiveness is seen. The impact of such feedback on personal development is likely to be substantially stronger when combined with a coaching process (cf. Feldman & Lankau, 2005).

## 6 | IN CONCLUSION

The story of assertiveness is both very old and new. For as long as humans have been social creatures, they have been confronting the question of "How hard, and how, should I push to get my way?" Generations of social scientists have revealed some of the dynamics surrounding assertiveness, and recent work has brought new answers into focus. Assertiveness matters for our outcomes, our relationships, and our well-being. With some frequency, we strike the wrong balance in the eyes of our counterparts and onlookers, pushing too hard or giving in too easily. And with some frequency, we have no idea how our assertiveness or accommodation has come across. Certain social categories (e.g., women) seem to face an even more challenging balancing act than others (e.g., men).

In some cases, our behavior primarily reflects our motivations and the value we attach to getting our way or getting along. In other cases, our (misguided) optimism or pessimism about pushing hard drives the way we act. Sometimes, we run from conflict, or lash out, as a result of failing to regulate our emotions. Whatever the reasons for our behavior, there is some reason to be hopeful about the challenge of assertiveness. Conflict and negotiation skills can be learned. And both social scientists and practitioners have gathered a body of knowledge about good practices that can help people assert themselves effectively.

Of course, the story of assertiveness is more than just old and new—it is unfinished. Our review suggests a number of topics that deserve further attention, and we briefly highlight three of these here. First, motivational, expectancy, and self-regulation accounts of assertive behavior have evolved largely in isolation from one another.

These mechanisms beg to be integrated into more complete models that could clarify when and why certain processes might dominate or recede and how these processes might interact or combine. A second area that merits additional work concerns how people adjust their assertiveness-related behaviors from one situation to the next. Further research might clarify how differences in effectiveness come not just from having different behavioral repertoires but by being to read situations and adjust assertiveness accordingly. Third, we see great value in further scholarly attention to the question of *how* people assert themselves. Some recent work has examined rationales and account-giving in negotiation and other contexts (e.g., Bhatia et al., 2016; Lee & Ames, in press; Troetschel et al., 2015). Additional work in this area could shed further light on what stories and frames people use, and which ones actually work, when making a proposal, declining a request, providing critical performance feedback, and so forth.

As long as people differ from one another in what they want—which is to say: as long as there are people—the question of assertiveness will remain. We look forward to joining others in pushing hard for answers about how people rise to this challenge.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Although not rooted in systematic research, one prescription that many developing negotiators find helpful is the guidance offered in the classic negotiation volume *Getting to Yes* (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011): "... start with the highest figure that you could justify without embarrassment ... the highest figure that you would try to persuade a neutral third party was fair" (p. 174).

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