

Asserti

...the magnificent way towards excellence

By **JOHN CLEMENTS**

The sound of my door bell signalled the arrival of my next client. This was my first appointment with Jerry Davies. (For confidentiality, the name and some personal details have been deliberately altered.) I'd wondered what he was going to be like, and what could be the reasons that had driven this successful man to seek my professional services.

It didn't take me long to connect some key pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that was Jerry's early life. At work he had been able to wear a mask of success which had gained him a position on the Board of Directors; but behind his

protective mask, well hidden from view, was one of the most hurting persons I had ever met. In order to survive, he had learned somehow to convince the outside world that this character called Jerry Davies was a great success. Then, without warning, his world suddenly collapsed around him as he learned that his parents had just died in a plane crash and discovered that his wife had been having an affair.

As a counsellor and mentor, I realised that I had to provide Jerry with some understanding of how he had arrived in his current position, and at the same time provide the kind of insight that

could empower him towards essential change. As you read this article you will be introduced to key ideas, which, if you can apply them to yourself, will firm up the foundations of your life and so ensure your continued success. Jerry needed to go through these layers of understanding until he had been able to absorb the declaration of self-worth which you will find at the close of this article. It is my deepest wish that you will be fellow pilgrims with Jerry and myself on the journey towards Excellence. Remember: when you are building a new house, you cannot possibly start with the roof. The foundations must be firmly laid first. ➡



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Imagine then, if you will, stepping through a shimmering portal and finding yourself in an uncharted land where countless unfamiliar stimuli and peculiar sensations assault your senses - a place where you have neither travel instructions nor textbook to guide you during your first bewildering days in this bizarre terrain.

The same is true when you reconstruct your approach to assertiveness.

Imagine then, if you will, stepping through a shimmering portal and finding yourself in an uncharted land where countless unfamiliar stimuli and peculiar sensations assault your senses - a place where you have neither travel instructions nor textbook to guide you during your first bewildering days in this bizarre terrain.

Sound frightening? Yes indeed! And you may, too, detect a faint ring of familiarity about it; for the fact is that you, like Jerry, have already stepped through that shimmering portal.

If you were able to access the unconscious levels of your memory-banks, you would recall the time when a man and a woman (your parents) coupled in sexual union. Millions of sperms battled to complete that fantastic voyage along the canal and into the enveloping safety of the womb. Only one of those sperms survived. That was you.

And you lived and grew, for a time, in a warm, comfortable, cosseted environment where you were fed and nurtured and soothed and protected. Then, without warning, you were pushed, squeezed, prodded and shunted through a long dark narrow tunnel, and finally cast out into a world full of harsh sounds, bright lights, powerful smells, and . . . what shall we call it? . . . pain, pain, pain. In short order you discovered the laws of gravity, the craving for comfort, the emptiness of hunger - and, perhaps for the first time, fear. Worst of all, you soon came to understand that this bizarre new world was inhabited by giants.

On the whole, things went along pretty well after that - as long as you could keep the giants happy. They would feed you, nurture you, keep you warm and content. They would also, sometimes, swaddle you in strange garments which made you feel wet and uncomfortable.

As the months passed, you began to find your way round the terrain, an uneven, unpredictable landscape strewn with hidden traps, discomforts and dangers quite beyond the understanding of your inexperienced brain.

You quickly discovered that the giants were intent on moulding you into their way of doing things. They would even go so far as to inflict pain on you if you did not do the desired thing so as to confirm that they were in control. They seemed, in short, to be relying on you to make them feel OK.

But their gain was your loss. In pleasing the giants - in fulfilling their need to feel OK - you yourself ended up feeling anything but OK.

Fortunately, there were a few giants who behaved in a refreshingly OK way and even the not-OK giants would occasionally do the right thing for you. Do you remember being given a surprise present just for "being you", or was every gift conditional? Did the giants ever allow you to explore and handle your environment yourself, or did they control it on your behalf? Did you ever feel the rosy glow of being shown you were loved and important, or was your whole infant life a frantic scramble to gain love and importance?

Parents who have the skill, understanding (and the time!) to attend to the child's real needs are not in the majority. Most of your early energy was expended pleasing the "needy" kind of giant: the one who sapped your OKness to boost his own reserves of that invaluable commodity.

The negative consequences of this kind of upbringing are legion: people travel through their whole lives seeking to please others, to appease their own cravings for acceptance and approval. The only kind of love that has ever been bestowed on them has been conditional on their performance. Behind the masks worn by many achievers is the child of yesterday still scrabbling for love and some recognition.

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Examine, for example, the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church - which, incidentally, is faithfully mirrored in the organisational framework of many large corporations, governments, schools and other institutions. The Pope, at the apex, is the quintessence of OKness: his level of OKness is diluted down through the system to the ordinary person in the pew who is so Not OK that they need to solicit extra OKness by repeated attendance at the confessional and subsequent penance.

This type of socialisation process creates a fertile field for the seeds of submissive behaviour to entwine their tendrils. You can identify the truth of this statement in the following examples of the way we may think at times:

"I'm terrified Susan won't stay with me if I don't buy her that ring. Her family will despise me if I don't please her."

"I'd hate to hurt Roger's feelings. He's expecting me to help him with his gardening / decorating / computer on Saturday. I hope Jenny won't mind us celebrating our anniversary the following week instead."

"No - I can't afford to think of myself here. That would be too selfish."

"I've got to please everyone else - I mustn't give them an excuse to think less of me."

"Brian's right again! His ideas are always better than mine!"

"Ow! He's broken my nose! But . . . it's OK, it doesn't hurt too much. I deserved it really."

What is the upshot of this kind of self-negating thinking?

In the short term, the self-destructive thinker may successfully avoid anxiety and guilt by being submissive; but his/her long-term future will be a minefield of negativities: pernicious loss of self-esteem; an

escalating sense of hurt, self-pity and anger; an inner environment of gnawing tension incubating headaches along with other psychosomatic illnesses.

But there is a way out of this labyrinth of self-destruction. It involves, first, locating your life-position in a structure called - surprisingly - the OK Corral. This is nothing to do with Wyatt Earp but was devised by Eric Berne as part of Transactional Analysis, a branch of psychology which has gained worldwide acclaim from experts in the field of the social sciences. This is the essence of the four life positions in the OK Corral:

I'M NOT OK - YOU'RE OK

I'M NOT OK - YOU'RE NOT OK

I'M OK - YOU'RE NOT OK

I'M OK - YOU'RE OK

NOW: which of those four life positions best describes the feelings of the self-destructive thinker?

We're not going to insult your intelligence by spelling it out!

His behaviour is as submissive as it can possibly get: his belief that he is not OK controls his every thought and action, but it doesn't stop there. It also leads him into the even tighter trap of believing that the rest of the world is fine and dandy. This auto-destructive mentality is a direct legacy of his forebears: parents and grandparents and so on back. His parents, he learned, were OK but he was not. What he tragically failed - and fails - to realise, however, is that those allegedly OK parents of his were about as far from OK as parents could be.

But what about people who are convinced not only that they themselves are not OK, but that nobody else is OK either? Which life position describes them?

Consider a child whose mother had undergone some early trauma herself. What kind of message would that mother pass down? What kind of beliefs would that child assimilate? Well, like the previous character, he would be submissive too. His beliefs would

be just as erroneous. His state would be equally powerless.

These two examples were both negative and submissive, each in his own way. But there is another end to the spectrum: the negative and aggressive character. This chap is a nasty piece of work, but not by chance. He sees the world as a dangerous place. Perhaps, when he was starting out, he treated others as OK and got taken advantage of. Once bitten, he is twice shy of appearing weak; so he is perpetually defensive. And the best form of defence is, of course, attack. Aggressiveness gets him what he wants; he knows no other behaviour. Unfortunately, but predictably, many aggressive people are disgracefully unaware of the down-side of their behaviour. They haven't twigged that fear is a poor motivator in the long term, for the very good reason that it can cause people to retaliate, or to isolate themselves from the aggressor. Worse still, aggressive people drain themselves of energy in their constant striving for control and because they can never afford to slacken their grip, their opinion of the entire human race becomes soured. These people are normally to be found, of course, in the **I'M OK - YOU'RE NOT OK** quadrant of the OK Corral.

We who aspire to Excellence advocate a more rational life position than any of the above. Our stance in the OK Corral lets us view ourselves and others as OK. And this resolves itself conveniently into four words which, quite apart from their neat simplicity and memorable rhythm, also encapsulate a profound truth which operates as a philosophy for successful living:

I'M OK - YOU'RE OK

This is the golden core of the concept of "assertiveness". A life lived around it becomes balanced in such a way as to avoid the excesses of both aggressiveness and submissiveness. It can be defined simply as a way of declaring your wants, needs and opinions openly and in good faith, whilst acknowledging your ➡

personal responsibility and respecting the rights of others.

Before going any further let's just take a moment to let you assess which life position you normally function under and to see how well developed your life skills are.

From the following exercise which depicts 9 different real life scenarios, select the response which would be most like your own in the same circumstances.

1. It's your daughter's 10th birthday and you want to be home in good time from your office to celebrate her cutting her birthday cake. Things have not gone well and you are already behind schedule; your manager waltzes in and asks if you could stay for a further two hours. What would you say?

- a)** Sorry, I really can't stay tonight as I must be home for my daughter's birthday party; ☐
- b)** Blast! Why do you always pick on me? Find somebody else! ☐
- c)** No, I can't tonight - but I will come in early tomorrow to help catch up; ☐
- d)** Yes, of course - that's no problem. ☐

2. You have lent your neighbour some money. You would now like it repaid but he seems to have conveniently forgotten about it. What would you do?

- a)** Confront him in the street and say that you've waited long enough - when is he going to pay you back? ☐
- b)** Just hope that he will remember it eventually; ☐
- c)** Make remarks about how hard up you are every time you see him, and ask if things are better for him; ☐
- d)** Take him aside and tell him how happy you were to lend him the money on condition that it would be repaid and that you now need it back. ☐

3. One of your friends who shares the petrol costs to work by

getting a lift in your car each morning nearly always keeps you waiting. He is always very apologetic but he never seems to improve his punctuality. Do you say:

- a)** Why the hell are you late again? ☐
- b)** I hope that you won't be late again every day this week! ☐
- c)** It's okay, we'll only be a little late arriving; ☐
- d)** Derek, I think it's unfair of you to always keep me waiting. I would feel much happier if you would be punctual in future. ☐

4. You are interrupted in the middle of a sentence. Would you:

- a)** Just carry on talking and ignore the person who has interrupted you; ☐
- b)** Ask them to wait a moment until you have finished speaking; ☐
- c)** Tell them to shut up and keep talking yourself; ☐
- d)** Wait until you get another opportunity to finish what you were saying. ☐

5. Virginia buys a new swimsuit. Her daughter says that she would not be seen dead wearing it. What should Virginia do?

- a)** Say that she doesn't care a fig what her daughter thinks, she feels great in it; ☐
- b)** Tell her daughter that she has no dress sense and wait for an opportunity to embarrass her later; ☐
- c)** Ask her why she does not like it and read a fashion magazine to see if she is right; ☐
- d)** Just feel dreadful and take it off. ☐

6. You are waiting for a bus and two teenagers push to the front. What would be your response?

- a)** Just ignore them and say nothing; ☐
- b)** Suggest that they should show more respect for their elders; ☐

- c)** Pull them back and insist that they take their turn; ☐
- d)** Point out politely that you were first in the queue and ask that they take their rightful place. ☐

7. You have taken a day off work to let contractors who have arranged to start at 8.00 am install your new bathroom. At one o'clock they have not arrived. What do you do?

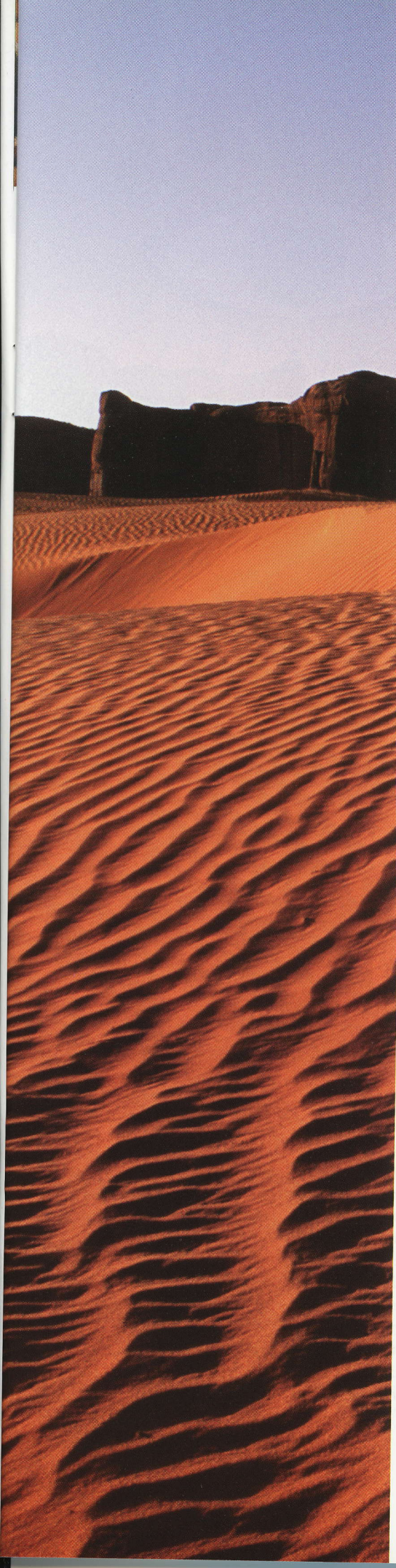
- a)** Phone their office and ask for an explanation, explaining that you took time off work, and that if this happens again you will send them a bill and cancel your order; ☐
- b)** Telephone and swear at them and slam the phone down; ☐
- c)** Phone to enquire what they think they are doing? ☐
- d)** Feel furious but decide to just wait and see what happens. ☐

8. If a time-consuming chore has to be done in the garden but you haven't time to do it yourself, what would you do?

- a)** Discuss the matter democratically with everyone in the house, and come to an agreement to work on it together; ☐
- b)** Tell your son to do it because he has more time than you, and doesn't help enough around the house; ☐
- c)** Do it yourself without telling anyone; ☐
- d)** Ask for volunteers but end up doing it yourself because nobody came to help. ☐

9. You are planning to hold a party and you ask a colleague if she would be willing to help. She agrees but on the day she fails to turn up. What would you do?

- a)** Pick up the phone and play merry hell with her for letting you down; ☐
- b)** Phone her straight away to check that she had remembered and that she is on the way; ☒



*I have found the following poem, written by
Walter Tubbs, encapsulates the essence of
assertiveness which Jerry so badly
required:-*

*If I just do my thing and you do yours
We stand in danger of losing each
other*

And ourselves

*I am not in this world to live up to
your expectations*

But I am in this world to confirm you

As a unique human being

And to be confirmed by you

*We are fully ourselves only in relation
to each other.*

The I detached from a Thou

Disintegrates

I do not find you by chance,

I find you by an active life

Of reaching out

*Rather than passively letting things
happen to me*

*I can act intentionally to make them
happen.*

I must begin with myself, true:

But I must not end with myself.

The truth begins with two.

- c) Manage the whole party yourself, but ask her what happened next time you see her; ☐
- d) Feel furious but do nothing about it, resolving instead to have no further contact with her in future. ☐

How to score

4 Points for each assertive answer

3 Points for each semi-assertive answer.

2 Points for each aggressive answer.

1 Points for each submissive answer.

HOW WELL DID YOU DO?

30+ Well done! You have correctly identified the best assertive answers.

The real test, however, is putting this knowledge into everyday practice.

20+ Quite good: you have a functional level of assertiveness but there is still some room for improvement. Take every opportunity to practise.

UNDER 20 You need to become more assertive. Do not miss any chance of developing these vital life skills!

KEY TO ANSWERS				
Q	a)	b)	c)	d)
1	4	2	3	1
2	2	1	3	4
3	2	3	1	4
4	3	4	2	1
5	4	2	3	1
6	1	3	2	4
7	4	2	3	1
8	4	2	1	3
9	2	4	3	1

We have so far discussed the verbal ("self-talk") level of assertiveness / submissiveness / OKness. There is yet another (some would say more subtle) level: the mental / emotional. This is neatly illustrated by what we shall call the EBBOM factor:

ENGAGE BRAIN BEFORE OPENING MOUTH!

Despite its very rhythmical resemblance to an instruction one might find enamelled on a railway lavatory-cistern, this concise little epigram can make the difference between optimum resolution of a

major conflict and humiliating defeat at the hands of an unscrupulous manipulator. The correct tone of response, addressing the factors of the issue precisely and objectively, spoken at exactly the right volume and accompanied by appropriate body language, can utterly deflate a huffing and puffing aggressor and make him listen to reason. Conversely, of course, the shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later approach will almost infallibly lead to an escalation of the conflict and perennial resentment for all parties involved.

What about Jerry and his need to cultivate empowerment? Over a period of several months I was slowly able to facilitate his understanding of how his past life had been intertwined with the kind of negative influences described earlier and how these negativities had betrayed themselves in his thinking and his non-verbal behaviour. With this inner personal knowledge he could now find a new "highway code" to base his life around.

I have found the following poem, written by Walter Tubbs, (on page 11) encapsulates the essence of assertiveness which Jerry so badly required.

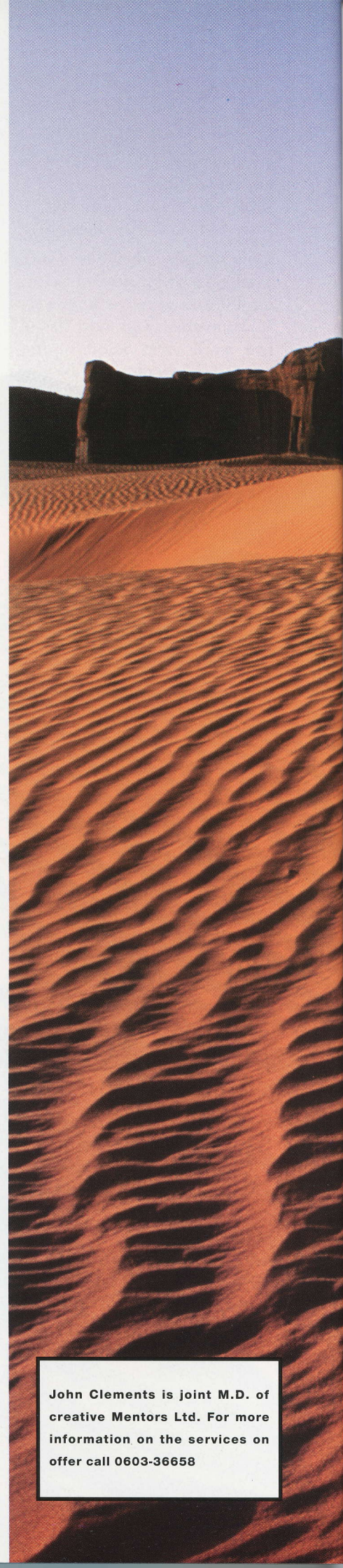
To cultivate true assertiveness, everyone could benefit from practising the following declaration. If you do this each day, you will ensure that you are well on the road to achieving Excellence.

EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT TO:-

- Express their own feelings, opinions and ideas;
- Ask for (but not demand) what they want;
- Refuse a request without feeling guilty;
- Make their own decisions in their own interests;
- Expect others to respect those rights.

Remember the OK Corral, trust its message, and try to maintain the ideal life position, because the truth is:

**YOU'RE OK, AND
SO IS EVERYBODY ELSE! ⇐**



John Clements is joint M.D. of creative Mentors Ltd. For more information on the services on offer call 0603-36658