

Surely one of the most important events of the Seventies has been the entry of women into the work force in greatly increasing numbers and with a new attentiveness to their status and prerogatives there. The economic pressure of inflation and the increasing frequency of single parenthood have yielded statistics that dispel the myth that 'women only work because they want extra goodies or entertainment outside the home.' But as these contemporary women enter or return to the work force, they begin to realize that their early training to be 'good girls,' 'nice,' and 'ladies' often rebounds to their detriment in their places of employment.

One aid that has developed in the latter half of the Seventies is assertiveness training. As a byproduct of the radical therapy movement in the United States in the early part of the decade, assertiveness training is one of the many new approaches to personal growth that developed in response to demand among users of counselling services for practical, relevant help with easy accessibility. Traditional counselling, as dispensed by psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers had fallen into some disrepute because it was difficult to demonstrate its effectiveness and it was expensive.

The move to demystification forced a reorganization of conventional practice among therapists and at the same time brought forth hosts of para-professional and atypically trained people into the counselling business. Alert professionals responded quickly to the changing demands of their customers and began to develop new approaches to helping people solve their problems. By 1975 a burst of new bestselling paperbacks hit the market: *Don't Say Yes When You Want to Say No* by Herbert Fensterheim, Ph.D., a psychologist, and his wife Jean Baer, a writer and editor; *When I Say No I Feel Guilty* by Manuel J. Smith, Ph.D., a psychologist; *The Assertive Woman* by Stanlee Phelps, a psychiatric social worker, and Nancy Austin, a worker at a community mental health centre in California—to cite some representative titles. These books and numerous others were suddenly to be found at newsstands and drugstore book racks all over Canada, while continuing education programs at colleges and universities began offering workshops in assertiveness and training weekends for assertiveness trainers.

Assertiveness is the ability 'to express honest feelings comfortably, to be direct and straightforward, and to exercise personal rights without denying the rights of others and without experiencing undue

# Assertiveness Training for Union Women

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**De plus en plus, les femmes membres de syndicats désirent prendre une part active aux programmes d'action assertive. L'auteur prédit des changements d'attitudes dans les syndicats pendant la prochaine décennie.**

anxiety or guilt,' to quote Phelps and Austin. It is immediately relevant in the home, the workplace and in meetings, and speaks to the concerns of women who have been brought up to be passive, submissive and to get their needs met through manipulation and the other forms of in-direction called 'feminine wiles.' Hardly a woman raised in North America is free of some kind of indoctrination in how to grow up 'lady-like.' For the working woman, then, assertiveness training presents a systematic focus on the differences between passive, assertive and aggressive, coupled with specific techniques for developing her capacity to be assertive and to modify her passive or aggressive behaviour. It also offers a perspective on other people's responses to assertive behaviour to help her deal with inadequate

personalities who feel threatened by her departure from the expected 'feminine' approach

Union women have been among the first organized groups to recognize the value of assertiveness training as a tool to help them both in the work setting and within their union organizations. Most of these women are in traditional 'women's' jobs in the clerical and service sectors and are thus subject to pressures arising from traditional role expectations. Although their contracts often contain protection against demands to make coffee and fetch drycleaning, the woman herself must assert her contract rights. The use of supervisors' evaluations as a tool of intimidation and manipulation requires supreme assertiveness on the part of the worker to maintain her rights and ensure she is treated fairly.

But the workplace is not the only setting where new skills in assertiveness are making important changes for unionized working women. According to Astrid Davidson, Director of Women's Programs for the British Columbia Federation of Labour, women who have taken assertiveness courses through their unions often go on to become active within the organizational structure of the union itself. They learn to get themselves heard at meetings, to deal effectively with their male co-workers saying 'What she really means is . . .' and eventually to become successful in arbitrations and at the bargaining table. By participating actively in the bargaining process they are able to ensure that special women's concerns, such as maternity leave and day care, are not used as expendables at the negotiating table. Their increased participation in their unions has had the inevitable effect of raising the awareness level of their fellow workers with respect to so-called 'women's issues.' Union men are now appreciating in new ways that good working conditions for both men and women workers are ultimately to the benefit of all.

The fact that assertiveness training has had a strong impact on union women means that an awareness of changing roles and behaviours is spreading among great numbers of different kinds of women.

With the spread of demand for assertiveness training among union women and thence to women in the work force at large, we may see the Eighties become the 'Assertiveness Decade.' With easily obtainable, practical training available, augmented by do-it-yourself books and workbooks, we may have a new decade in which 'nice' becomes the four-letter word, replacing 'lady' of the Seventies.