

Assertive Versus Passive

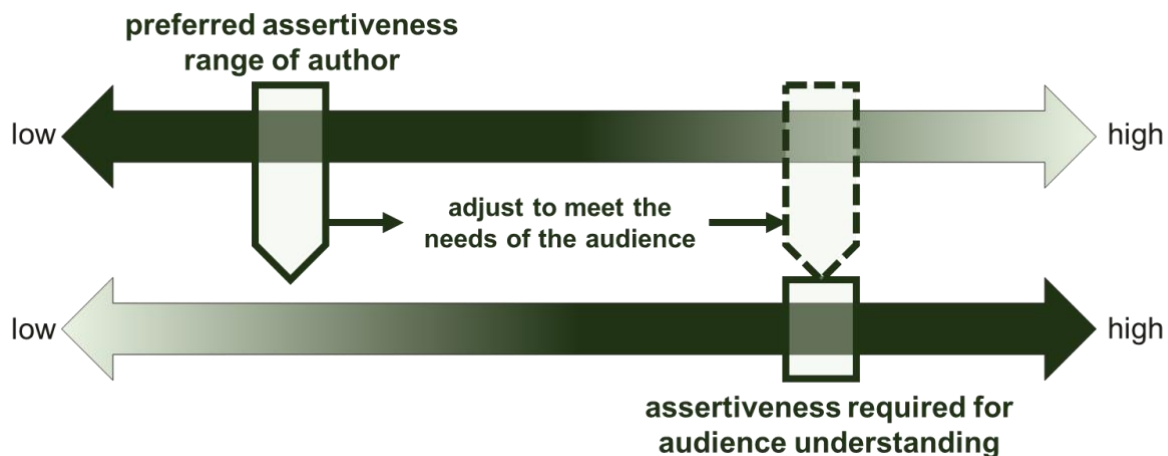
Many publicly funded organisations have strong cultures with deeply embedded expectations about being detail-oriented, cautious, and measured. Over time, these expectations can influence the perceptions of employees about the tone of communications with external stakeholders. Subtle signals that might be heard clearly within the organisation could be missed entirely by external stakeholders who are not fully tuned in to the message.

Publicly funded organisations tend to have long lives, which in turn tend to foster strong cultural norms. The cultures of many publicly funded organisations value precision, nuance, evidence, and expertise. High levels of transparency and accountability, along with the obligation to be good stewards of public resources, tend to reinforce avoidance of risk. Cautious and sometimes equivocal language is preferred over simpler and more pithy statements, and evidence-driven analysis over eye-catching conclusions.

Many people in publicly funded organisations take seriously the obligation to listen respectfully to the views of others. Fear that an assertive tone may be misinterpreted as aggression or disinterest tends to encourage careful, even passive language choices.

As people become more accustomed to, and more comfortable with, communication styles that are more subtle and less assertive, they can find it increasingly difficult to judge their own tone and clarity. This can lead to miscommunications with stakeholders, including most politicians and the public, who have less time and tolerance for nuanced messages. Cautious and analytic language can inadvertently hide important information from the people who need it.

External stakeholders also tend to be less familiar with the subject matter than experts within publicly funded organisations. These audiences can easily get lost in the detail if important messages are not delivered assertively, missing opportunities to identify critical concerns and contribute to better policy outcomes.



The communication preferences of an author can be a barrier to understanding for the intended audience unless authors adapt their communication styles to meet the needs of audiences. For stakeholders who are dealing with many competing priorities, authors should avoid passive language and simplify technical detail wherever possible.

Calibrating assertiveness of communications to suit stakeholder preferences often means highlighting key messages in direct, succinct language that does not require prior knowledge or extensive background reading. This can be challenging for authors trained to analyse complex detail. To do this well, authors need to understand and overcome cultural norms that constrain how they prefer to express themselves.

Recognising and adapting to the communication needs of audiences encourages authors to clearly signpost key messages, rather than burying them in the detail. Active and direct language, with simple examples, are easier for busy stakeholders to understand without extensive expertise, prior knowledge, or background reading.

This approach forces authors to step outside their familiar comfort zone of cautious and equivocal language. Making simple statements about complex subjects also, inevitably, sacrifices some detail and accuracy. But some loss of fidelity in the signal is often better than an important message being lost in background noise, or a total failure of transmission because the intended audience has tuned out.