SIGMA
Leadership Series

Great Leaders
Are Flexible

SIGMA
ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS INC.

GREAT LEADERS ARE FLEXIBLE

> " Let no one think that flexibility and a predisposition to compromise is a sign of weakness or a sell-out.
> — Paul Kagame

Flexibility is an increasingly important trait in a rapidly changing economic and social environment. Leaders who have **Flexibility** are those who can modify their style or approach to leadership in response to uncertain or unpredictable circumstances. In addition, flexible leaders can adapt to changes as they come. They can revise their plans to incorporate new innovations and overcome challenges, while still achieving their goals. Flexibility is not only about surviving and thriving in new situations. Adaptable leaders also introduce new behaviors into familiar situations, expressing creativity and finding new ways to solve problems. Flexibility is the willingness to try new behaviors — whether or not the organization is undergoing change.

However, just being open to new behaviors is not enough to make an effective flexible leader. First, leaders need to recognize situations in which their old behaviors are not working. Next, they need to decide how to approach the problem, including what new behaviors or approaches are feasible, and which will accomplish their goals within the constraints of their situation. Finally, once a new path is decided upon, flexible leaders need to be able to assess the current success and progress of their new behaviors, and reevaluate or further modify behaviors that are unsuccessful.

How Flexible Are You?

In assessing your flexibility, ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I depending too much on any one behavior?
- Have I considered alternative approaches to solving a problem?
- Am I open to trying new suggestions or strategies from others?
- Can I recognize when changes to my behavior are needed?
- How often do I stop to assess whether my approach is working?
- Do I encourage my employees to be flexible in times of change?

Improve Your Flexibility

Appreciate the versatility of flexibility. The ways in which a leader can be flexible are infinite. Different leaders will face different challenges, and each leader will need to recognize and seize opportunities for flexibility within their own sphere of influence and action. For example, here are a few cases in which flexibility can improve the performance of leaders. First, flexibility can aid in solving difficulties in communicating or connecting with employees. Everyone will have different listening, learning, or comprehension styles, and the flexible leader can not only understand it but act on it. Identify how an employee needs a leader to communicate and change your approach to fit this model.[1]

Secondly, leaders need flexibility when interacting with individuals from different fields, industries, or cultures. Global organizations and interdisciplinary teams try to capitalize on the differences in education, experience, and knowledge of diverse individuals, but leaders must be able to let go of their usual routines and embrace the styles of others when working with individuals from different backgrounds. Finally, large changes in tools, technology, or work styles are common as technology advances and organizations seek greater efficiency. Leaders need to be able to roll with these changes, keep up with changing trends in their work, and adopt new behaviors to match the rate of progress. Many individuals are hesitant or uncomfortable with change, but an effective leader needs to be able to recognize, accept, and welcome change to stay at the top of their game.

Foster flexible employees. Leaders aren't the only individuals who need to be flexible for an organization to be successful. Encouraging employees to be more flexible in their own work will help develop their flexibility skills. Employees who are more flexible understand the need for changing behaviors with changing circumstances. If employees understand the value of flexibility, they will be more open to any changes suggested by their leaders. Fostering employee flexibility also allows individuals to try new behaviors in their own roles, thus improving their problem solving and increasing their sense of control over their own work. Employees given the trust and freedom to try new approaches feel a greater sense of ownership in their work and are generally more productive.[2]

Lean on your other leadership characteristics. The actual expression, implementation, and success of flexibility will depend on your ability to use your other leadership characteristics in new situations.[3] For example, leaders who are creative may be better equipped to brainstorm new ways to problem solve. Leaders who are persuasive may be better able to convince their employees to try new behaviors in times of change. Similarly, leaders who are effective communicators can explain why their new behaviors are important, encouraging employees to trust in the leader's changing plans. Finally, having strength in some or all of these other skills will allow a leader to be flexible in their own behaviors while also encouraging employees to be more flexible and open to change.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Become More Flexible

The following steps can help you become more flexible:

1. **Look for opportunities to be more flexible.** It is easy to fall into routine in many parts of daily life, and often, the opportunity to be flexible is overlooked or unrecognized. Leaders can learn to identify situations in which flexibility might be a valuable resource, such as when a familiar situation changes, or when new problems arise. Before facing new situations or challenges, consider what your initial response to this challenge would be. Is this behavior chosen because it is the most effective approach? Try to tailor your responses to the actual situation at hand. Over time, leaders can become more comfortable with ambiguity, allowing them to not only display flexibility, but to do so with ease and comfort.

2. **Listen to the advice of others.** While flexible leaders are open to trying new approaches, it is not necessary for the flexible leader to generate all the new solutions themselves. The experience, knowledge, and skills of individuals can be leveraged to help leaders consider, evaluate, and implement new approaches to problem-solving. Flexible leaders should be open to the input of others and understand that the best solutions don't need to come from the top.

3. **Check your progress.** As leaders have more responsibilities assigned to them, or multiple deadlines approaching, it can be tempting to fall back on behaviors or strategies for problem solving that have been successful in the past. Remember to pause before making decisions or starting new assignments to consider whether the path you've outlined is really the best approach for your current project. Reflect on why you chose the strategy you did, and consider some alternative methods. In short, dedicating this time for reflection can encourage leaders to be not only more flexible but also creative and innovative in their work.

Assess Flexibility With the LSP-R®

The Leadership Skills Profile – Revised® (LSP-R) is a personality-based leadership assessment that measures 50 core competencies, including Flexibility. The assessment can be administered online in 25 minutes, and comes with an automatically generated Focus Report, including scores, personalized feedback, and templates for creating competency-based leadership development plans (view a sample Focus Report).

LSP-R® Free Trial

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Why is flexibility important for leadership?

Your leadership style — Learn to be flexible in 3 steps.

Develop leadership competencies with SIGMA's one-hour, high-impact Leadership Development Workshops, led by our experienced coaches.

References

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