

SIGMA

Leadership Series



**Great Leaders
Are Learners**



GREAT LEADERS ARE LEARNERS

“ Potential is not an endpoint but a capacity to grow and learn.

– Eileen Kennedy-Moore

In the modern workplace, technology and information are constantly driving change, and adaptability is the key to success. To stay ahead of the curve, leaders need to seek out opportunities for self-improvement. It is easier to anticipate and adapt to evolving industry trends when you approach situations with an open mind, seeking ways to learn and improve. Research has shown, for example, that curious individuals adapt faster to new roles¹.

Among leaders, this desire to learn often involves embracing challenges and demonstrating the motivation to grow by responding positively to constructive feedback. Leaders who are open to learning are intellectually curious. They enjoy expanding their knowledge base, both on topics directly tied to their role and also those that may be of personal interest². They are also more likely to invest in professional development opportunities to update their skills.

In assessing your desire to learn, ask yourself the following questions:

- Have I adopted an attitude of curiosity that promotes learning and creativity?
- Do I seek opportunities to step outside my comfort zone?
- Do I receive feedback gracefully and treat it as a learning opportunity?
- Am I setting aside time each week to keep up-to-date in my field?
- Have I recently taken steps to acquire a new skill or broaden my scope of knowledge?
- What projects could I take on that would challenge my abilities and expertise?

Improve Your Desire to Learn

Develop your curiosity: Intellectual curiosity is about more than acquiring new skills. It also involves a desire to learn more about the world. Leaders who appear driven to constantly learn more about a variety of topics are likely to see a positive impact in many areas of their work. For example, when you have a broader knowledge base, you have a greater variety of experiences that you can draw from. By applying these experiences in novel and creative ways, you may find yourself better able to generate more innovative solutions³. You can begin to foster your own curiosity by asking questions when you're in a new situation, learning from the expertise of others, and applying knowledge gained in one domain to others.

Step outside your comfort zone: It is easy to stick with what is familiar because venturing outside “tried and true” methods comes with a degree of risk. However, the fear of failure can cause you to miss opportunities for self-improvement and hinder innovation. Instead, approach challenges with curiosity. Keep in mind that you can learn from both success *and* failure. While success may feel rewarding and failure can be painful, it is important to take time to reflect on either outcome. Asking yourself questions, such as “What can I learn from this experience?”, can help you identify what worked and what you can do differently next time⁴.

Treat feedback as a learning opportunity: Feedback is a valuable source of information about what you are doing well, and where you can grow. While constructive criticism can be difficult to hear, leaders who receive it gracefully can use it to address concerns or areas for improvement. Seek out feedback from supervisors, peers, and direct reports on your performance. When you receive feedback from others, thank them for sharing their thoughts and take time to reflect on their comments and suggestions.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Improve Your Intellectual Curiosity

The following steps can help you develop your intellectual curiosity:

1. **Make learning a habit.** Individuals who are intellectually curious have a deep desire to learn about a wide variety of topics. The modern corporate environment is dynamic, and having a broader knowledge base can help you manage these changes. Set aside time each week to keep up-to-date with important industry trends and advances in your field. This can take the form of reading articles, professional blogs, or books written by industry experts. Alternatively, try listening to a podcast during your commute. Doing so can help ensure that you remain knowledgeable about issues relevant to your organization.
2. **Seek out professional development.** In addition to self-guided learning, development opportunities can also take the form of workshops, conferences, or webinars. You may also wish to consider bringing a guest speaker in to speak to your organization. External instructors can deliver training on new topics and provide fresh perspectives. Professional development can also help you focus on a few specific areas to improve that you can apply to future tasks, preparing yourself and your organization to adapt more quickly to new trends.
3. **Challenge yourself with a stretch assignment.** Tasks or projects that exceed your current ability or expertise can challenge you to build on your existing skillset. Especially when paired with feedback, stretch assignments are an excellent development tool for leaders⁵. Seeking out stretch assignments also showcases your potential to step into a more senior role. They demonstrate that you’re willing to leave your comfort zone, work hard, and grow. As a point of caution, make sure these assignments are challenging, but realistic. If they’re entirely beyond your abilities, you risk becoming overwhelmed. Seek support, feedback, and guidance from others as necessary.

Resources



[The Importance of Learning](#)



[Why the Best Leaders are Full-Time Learners](#)



Develop your desire to learn by taking advantage of SIGMA's coaching services.

Contact SIGMA for coaching on developing your skills as a leader.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.

Email: support@SigmaHR.com

Call: 800-265-1285

References

¹ Harrison, S. H., Sluss, D. M., Ashforth, B. E., Harrison, S. H., Sluss, D. M., & Ashforth, B. E. (2011). Curiosity adapted the cat: The role of trait curiosity in newcomer adaptation. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 96*, 211-220.

² Amabile, T. M., & Pratt, M. G. (2016). The dynamic componential model of creativity and innovation in organizations: Making progress, making meaning. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 36*, 157-183.

³ Hagtvedt, L. P., Dossinger, K., Harrison, S. H., & Huang, L. (2019). Curiosity made the cat more creative: Specific curiosity as a driver of creativity. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 150*, 1-13.

⁴ Ellis, S., Carette, B., Anseel, F., & Lievens, F. (2014). Systematic reflection: Implications for learning from failures and successes. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 23*, 67-72.

⁵ DeRue, D. S., Wellman, N., DeRue, D. S., & Wellman, N. (2009). Developing leaders via experience: The role of developmental challenge, learning orientation, and feedback availability. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 94*, 859-875.