

SIGMA

Leadership Series



**Great Leaders
Are Open-Minded**



GREAT LEADERS ARE OPEN-MINDED

“Those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.

— George Bernard Shaw

When we think of an ideal leader, we often conjure the image of a confident, secure, assertive individual who is not afraid to make decisions and lay down a direction for their unit. Because of this perception, openness to new ideas, approaches, or suggestions by others is an overlooked and underrated managerial skill. Open-mindedness, however, can be an asset to employees and leaders alike. When we are open to ideas, we are more willing to consider creative, innovative, or novel approaches. We are generally also more open to feedback of our own performance, and the ways in which we can improve in the future. Leaders who are open-minded tend to be more self-aware¹, trusted by their employees², and interested in developing their skills³.

While some individuals are more predisposed to enjoy new experiences or ideas, anyone can develop their skills of open-mindedness. It is a process that involves not only your own efforts at being accepting and welcoming of new suggestions, but also of creating an environment where your direct reports are willing to volunteer their ideas. Be patient – it takes time for mutual trust and understanding to form between leaders and employees, and attempting to force or rush the process is likely to backfire, derailing your progress.

In assessing how open-minded you are to new ideas, ask yourself the following questions:

- Has there ever been a time when I changed my mind on an organizational issue?
- What would it take for me to change my approach to a problem?
- Do I solicit new ideas from my direct reports?
- Do I show recognition and appreciation for the ideas suggested by others?
- Does my unit support a culture of open-mindedness and feedback?

Improve Your Open-Mindedness

Be respectful: As you begin to develop your open-mindedness, you may find that you need to “fake it ‘til you make it”. In this case, the easiest step to take to begin being more open is to be respectful when others offer to share ideas with you. Allow the other person time to make their suggestion, never belittle or insult an idea, and thank them for their input. Being open-minded

does not mean taking every suggestion given to you, but it does mean taking every suggestion seriously. Creating a culture of respect and trust between yourself and your direct reports will open the door for more feedback and input from employees down the line. Employees will not only remember how you have treated their suggestions, but will notice how you treat the suggestions of others and will act accordingly. Remember that you are setting an example of how new ideas or approaches are handled in your organization, and therefore each suggestion from others is a chance to show that you are willing to listen and treat employees in a respectful manner.

Practice self-reflection: Understanding yourself is an important early step in appreciating the input of others. First, you should examine your past performance and behaviors. Are there any obvious strengths you have? Are there any noticeable areas for development? Being aware of where we are strong and where we struggle can help us to recognize when we should seek the feedback and input of others to improve performance. Beyond understanding our own performance, self-reflection can also help to identify any underlying thoughts, feelings, or motivations that influence our behavior. Recognizing the filters through which we operate can help us to overcome these biases to remain more open to suggestions from others, especially in cases where these ideas are wildly different from our own.

Make gratitude a habit: Once we have acknowledged our own strengths, flaws, and biases, we can reflect on these with a sense of gratitude. Not only can we appreciate our own skills and successes, but also the skill and value of others we work with. Individuals who are close-minded often react to input from others with resentment, hostility, or anger. Gratitude can help you acknowledge situations where others are being helpful, and to appreciate this help as an act of kindness⁴. It can prevent feelings of negativity toward others who are skilled in areas where you may be weak. Understand that others in your unit are a resource that you can draw on. Learning to appreciate and acknowledge the skills of others opens the door for you to accept their help or feedback in a positive, productive way.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Become More Open-Minded

The following steps can help you open your mind to new ideas or approaches:

1. **Broaden your horizons.** People are creatures of habit: they often eat the same breakfast, take the same route to work, read the same news sources, and closely stick to their routine each workday. While this is a natural inclination, restricting yourself to the same social and physical environment every day limits your exposure to new things. One of the easiest ways to become more open-minded is to change up some of our routines, familiarizing ourselves to new people, places, information, or ideas. This can help us to take a new perspective, approach things from a different angle, or even better understand issues and people around us. This takes practice – the longer we have been entrenched in our own routines, the less open we are to new suggestions and ideas⁴. Consider reading news from a different source, avoiding exclusively checking social media that echoes your own personal values or feelings, or looking for opportunities to meet and work with new people. By slowly integrating new things into your routine

now, you are preparing yourself to be more willing to consider or accept novel ideas from others in the future.

- 2. Seek out feedback and suggestions.** For a variety of reasons, people often dislike or are uncomfortable providing frank, truthful feedback⁵. Some individuals may fear negative repercussions or confrontation as a result of their honesty. It is up to you as a leader to create a safe, open environment where employees feel comfortable sharing feedback or ideas. After a project or task is completed, ask for feedback from your employees on your performance. When a new change is introduced, open the floor for employee input. If you begin asking for employee feedback often, employees will come to recognize that their input is wanted and valued. Remember, even if you ask for feedback, it must be paired with the respectful treatment of ideas and individuals, otherwise they will not be willing to offer their ideas.
- 3. Engage in a conversation.** When exchanging ideas or listening to input from others, practice a few active listening skills. Ask clarifying questions to show your interest and ensure you fully understand the other person; give your undivided attention; and show you are engaged and taking their input seriously. Further, look for opportunities to turn their suggestion into a conversation. Share any insights or ideas that arise from what the other person is saying; make suggestions for how their ideas can be adapted or further refined; and build on their ideas together to create a solution that will best fit your current situation. While you should do more listening than talking, it is important to bring curiosity and interest to your conversations with employees to help foster productive and creative ideas that benefit yourself, your unit, and your organization.

Resources



watch

[Are You Open-Minded? Three Ways to Break Thinking Patterns](#)



read

[7 Benefits of Being Open-Minded](#)



develop

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