

SIGMA Leadership Series

Great Leaders
Are Socially
Astute



GREAT LEADERS ARE SOCIALLY ASTUTE

“The major challenge of most executives is not understanding the practice of leadership, it is practicing their understanding of leadership.

- Marshall Goldsmith

Social astuteness is the art of understanding people. It is a skill that enables one to accurately read and respond diplomatically to organizational trends and norms. Social astuteness also allows people to deal effectively with organizational politics, making it an indispensable skill for anyone who finds themselves in a position of leadership.

Social astuteness is widely recognized as beneficial in the workplace. Studies demonstrate that social astuteness explains the relationship between proactive personality and performance, as well as personality and altruism.¹ These results suggest that employees who are more socially astute work better, both on-the-job and in their interactions with others.

The workplace benefits of social astuteness are especially pronounced for leaders. In a study done by Davidson College and the Center for Creative Leadership, employees who were more socially astute received higher leader effectiveness ratings from their bosses.² Similar studies have confirmed this relationship by demonstrating that measures of social astuteness can be used to accurately predict leader effectiveness.³

In assessing your level of social astuteness, ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I able to accurately read others' thoughts and emotions?
- Do I respond diplomatically in social and workplace situations?
- Am I comfortable and confident networking with others?
- Am I able to build and maintain a reputation for myself, my team, and my organization?
- Am I aware of trends and norms in my organization and the industry?
- Do I understand organizational politics and how it plays out in my company?
- Am I able to engage in organizational politics in meaningful and productive ways?

Improve Your Social Astuteness

Grow your political skills: A more colloquial term for social astuteness is ‘political skill.’ Political skills are associated with higher performance ratings and likelihood of gaining a promotion.⁴ This relationship can be explained by the fact that political skills are significantly associated with transformational leadership.⁵ Transformational leaders are charismatic and influential; they transform people and places. As a result, people high in political skill naturally move up the [leadership pipeline](#).

To hone your political skills, try observing and participating in your organization’s management activities. Consider volunteering for committees or assignments where you will have the chance to take on responsibility, build relationships, communicate with others outside of your team, and engage in decision making. Take time to read books, attend courses or workshops, and watch TED Talks on power and politics. Reflect on how the things you learn apply to your organization and challenge yourself to put them into practice.

Beware becoming a pseudo-transformational leader: Political skill can easily fall into the wrong hands, and social astuteness can be abused. In these cases, employees exhibit enormously influential, yet self-serving behaviours.⁶ This phenomenon is known as pseudo-transformational leadership, and it’s not uncommon to find pseudo-transformational leaders in positions of power. Pseudo-transformational leaders score high in many facets of transformational leadership, but they also rank high on dark triad personality traits (psychopathy, narcissism, Machiavellianism). They are more likely to cheat, engage in fraudulent or exploitative workplace behaviour, and make unethical decisions.⁷ As you hone your political skills, resist the temptation to misuse them. Reflect on why you pursue different positions of power and how you use your influence. Check in with your subordinates and ask them to reflect openly on your leadership to make sure you’re using your political skill in the right way, for the right reasons.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Become More Socially Astute

Social astuteness is commonly considered to be innate; either you have it or you don’t. Today, however, research is increasingly suggesting that social and political skills can be developed and improved. Here are a few tips for how you can become more socially astute:⁸

- 1. Practice mindfulness.** People who are socially astute take time to observe and reflect. They control their impulses and do not act irrationally. Practicing mindfulness is a great way to learn how to think, speak, and act with intent. If you’re unfamiliar with mindfulness, try listening to short meditations or scheduling time throughout your day to reflect, express gratitude, or practice acts of kindness.
- 2. Learn to network.** “Networking is marketing. Marketing yourself, marketing your uniqueness, marketing what you stand for” (Christine Comaford). People who are socially astute understand themselves, recognize their uniqueness, and know what they stand for; this makes networking an incredibly natural process. If you want to become more socially astute, practice networking both inside your organization and out.

Mentorship is one of the most powerful forms of networking because it is mutual and authentic. Mentors can provide valuable guidance, connections, and resources. Further, mentoring others can give leaders the chance to hone their coaching skills. If you want to become more socially astute, pursue opportunities for mentorship on both sides of the relationship.

- 3. Engage in politics.** Social astuteness is about being able to diplomatically navigate organizational norms and relationships. To develop these political skills, you will need to engage in corporate politics. Practice building and understanding relationships with others outside of your immediate circle. Don't shy away from conflict when it arises, using difficult conversations as a chance to practice your mediation skills. Engaging in different kinds of relationship and workplace situations can help build your reputation and your capacity to influence others.

Resources



[10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation \(TED Talk\)](#)



[Power: Why Some People Have it and Others Don't](#)



[Develop your social astuteness 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

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