

# SIGMA EI Series



**Great Leaders  
Think Creatively**



## GREAT LEADERS THINK CREATIVELY

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**Creativity is the power to connect the seemingly unconnected.**

**– William Plomer**

Creativity is important for artistic careers, but it can also help a multitude of organizations and industries function better. Creativity can help managers lead their organizations through times of change, allowing them to stay flexible and be open to new ideas. Creative leaders also turn problems into opportunities, identifying patterns and generating solutions that others may overlook. Research suggests that high emotional intelligence (EI) can help promote leaders' creativity, because emotionally intelligent leaders are more likely to channel their negative emotions in productive, creative ways.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, managers with strong EI also help improve the creativity of their followers.<sup>2,3</sup> This may be because emotionally intelligent leaders provide a safe, trusting environment for direct reports to take risks and suggest new ideas.<sup>2</sup>

Taking time to develop creativity will help you generate original solutions and ideas. It will also create a more positive mood at work.<sup>4</sup> Becoming more creative may seem like a daunting task at first, especially for leaders who don't think their job provides room for innovation, but creativity is a valuable leadership competency that can be applied in a variety of ways.

In assessing your ability to think creatively, ask yourself the following questions:

- What kinds of creative outlets do I have in my job?
- Where in my role, department, or organization is there room for innovation?
- Do I typically do creative work with other people?
- How do I brainstorm new ideas?
- When I'm stuck on a problem, what strategies do I use to generate solutions?

### Improve Your Creativity

**Redefine creativity:** People are often intimidated at the thought of being creative. Usually, this is because they associate creativity with large-scale innovation, like designing completely new products or systems from scratch. It's important to keep in mind that these impressive feats are usually the culmination of years of small creative steps by a large group of people. To avoid becoming discouraged when trying to hone your creative skills, reframe your definition of creativity to acknowledge that everyone has the capacity to be creative, and that large-scale innovation is usually a team effort rather than an individual accomplishment.

**Find room for creativity in your job:** At first glance your job may seem like it has no room for creativity, but there are likely small avenues for experimentation and imagination. Think of places where you can try out small, bite-sized creative activities. For instance, you can vary how you sign-off on emails, or how you begin meetings (e.g., include an ice-breaker question or a short group meditation before jumping into business). You can also involve others in your creative journey by organizing group brainstorming sessions, being open to others' suggestions, and giving them space (and permission) to be creative.

**Don't over-structure creative efforts:** Rules, routines, and guidelines can be helpful for creating efficient systems and providing a sense of comfort. But in the words of Dan Stevens, "Comfort... is the great enemy of creativity." Structure can stanch the flow of creativity because the nature of creative effort is to try what's never been done before. Therefore, creativity also comes with an inevitable degree of risk. As a leader, you can build creativity by moving your organization away from arbitrary rules and routines. In some cases, you will be obliged to comply to a set of rules, such as avoiding potentially discriminatory questions during an interview. In other cases, like when shopping for new accounting software, it may be a good idea to think creatively about what software features best meet your company's needs, rather than simply using what your competitors use or conforming to industry standards.

## Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Improve Your Creative Thinking

The following steps can help you improve your ability to think creatively:

1. **Try question-storming.** People tend to focus on answering questions rather than asking them. By shifting your focus to asking good questions, you can help your team explore new avenues and find new solutions. Try setting yourself a timer for 15 minutes and writing down 50 questions about a topic you're stuck on (e.g., a problem or decision). Don't edit the questions or consider their quality, just write down as many as you can. At the end of the 15 minutes, refine your questions from yes/no to open-ended questions, and pick your favourites to use as a starting point for finding solutions.
2. **Change your surroundings.** A simple way to start thinking differently is to change your surroundings. Whether it's going for a walk, taking a shower, working from a cafe, listening to music, or redecorating your workspace, a new environment can bring new perspectives and spur your creativity.
3. **Switch from "no, but" to "yes, and".** Often while brainstorming, ideas are rejected for being unrealistic or low quality (e.g., "no, that idea won't work, *but* listen to this one..."). The power of "yes, and" is to explore ideas deeply by building on them, refining them to make them better (e.g., "yes, I like these aspects, *and* I want to suggest..."). Before beginning to brainstorm, set a ground rule for your team to replace "no, but" with a more open-minded "yes, and." By doing so you will create a safer environment for creativity and innovation, where people are not afraid to propose new ideas.

## Resources



[The Surprising Habits of Original Thinkers](#)



[Creativity: The Secret to Better Leadership](#)



Develop your creativity 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](mailto:support@SigmaHR.com)

Call: 800-265-1285

## References

<sup>1</sup> Xu, X., Liu, W., & Pang, W. (2019). Are emotionally intelligent people more creative? A meta-analysis of the emotional intelligence-creativity link. *Sustainability*, *11*(21), 6123.

<sup>2</sup> Rego, A., Sousa, F., Cunha, M. P., Correia, A., Saur-Amaral, I. (2007). Leader self-reported emotional intelligence and perceived employee creativity: An exploratory study. *Creativity and Innovation Management*, *16*(3), 250-264.

<sup>3</sup> Castro, F., Gomes, J., & Sousa, F. C. (2012). Do intelligent leaders make a difference? The effect of a leader's emotional intelligence on followers' creativity. *Creativity and Innovation Management*, *21*(2), 171-182.

<sup>4</sup> Amabile, T. M., Barsade, S. G., Mueller, J. S., & Staw, B. M. (2005). Affect and creativity at work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *50*(3), 367-403.