

# SIGMA EI Series



**Great Leaders  
Can Delay Gratification**



## GREAT LEADERS CAN DELAY GRATIFICATION

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**Patience is bitter, but the fruit is sweet.**

**– Jean-Jacques Rousseau**

How often have you been intensely focused on an important task at work when an email pops up and draws your attention to your inbox? Choosing between the two options – the immediate reward of opening the email versus the longer-term reward of completing the task at hand – is a good example of needing to exercise delayed gratification at work. This is an important skill for leaders, who must be able to stay focused on long-term goals without getting distracted by instant gratification.

The ability to consistently choose long-term goals over short-term rewards is linked to a variety of positive outcomes in ones' personal life (e.g., a healthier lifestyle and greater life satisfaction<sup>1</sup>) and work life (e.g., improved job performance<sup>2</sup> and job satisfaction<sup>3</sup>). Without the ability to delay gratification, leaders also have a harder time setting priorities, and may tend to procrastinate more.<sup>3</sup> Evidently, delayed gratification is a valuable skill to cultivate, and can benefit leaders themselves as well as their team.

In assessing your ability to delay gratification, ask yourself the following questions:

- What long-term goals do I currently have at work?
- Which short-term tasks tend to prevent me from making progress on my long-term goals?
- What strategies do I use to avoid impulsive decision making?
- Do I have any tools that could help me stay focused on long-term goals at work?

### Improve Your Ability to Delay Gratification

**Know your goals:** Delaying gratification is not just about having the self-control to resist temptation. In addition to saying “no,” you need to know what objective you are saying “yes” to (e.g., by working overtime occasionally to meet a pressing deadline, you can improve your chances at a future promotion by demonstrating adaptability and commitment). The promise of a clear future reward will make it easier for you to set aside your desire for instant gratification. If you find that you are dissatisfied with your current work habits and want to work towards more self-discipline, take some time to reflect and write down your longer-term professional goals. Then, beside that list, write down a second list of your current work habits. Put a check mark beside habits that serve your goals, highlight those that do not, and focus your future attention towards trying to reduce the unhelpful work behaviors.

**Use “cool” rather than “hot” thinking:** People who are better at delaying gratification are also better at shifting their thoughts to “cool”, less emotional, and more logical topics (e.g., thinking about how yelling at a direct report would strain your relationship in the future), rather than fixating on “hot”, emotional, and less logical thoughts about a reward (e.g., how yelling might feel good because you’re angry). The next time you’re having difficulty avoiding an immediate reward, try taking a step back from your emotions and approaching the situation logically.

**Recognize different forms of delayed gratification:** While ignoring distractions like email notifications is part of practicing delayed gratification, there are also various other situations where you would want to use this skill. For example, sometimes leaders get swept up in a “whirlwind” of apparently urgent business all day (e.g., back-to-back last-minute meetings) and do not reserve time to work on their planned to-do list or strategic planning for the future. Other times, leaders may choose to prioritize simple, less important tasks because they can cross them off their lists more easily than harder tasks that require more effort, focus, or time. These are other times where you must choose between an immediate or delayed reward.

## Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Improve Your Delayed Gratification

The following steps can help you become better at delaying gratification:

- 1. Imagine your future self.** We often forget that we’re benefiting ourselves when we give up immediate personal enjoyment for disciplined toil. Research has found that when people take the time to visually imagine their older, future selves, they are better at prioritizing long-term goals like saving money.<sup>4</sup> The same principle can be applied at work. The next time you have trouble deciding between investing in a short- or long-term goal, try imagining how your future self could benefit from each decision.
- 2. Set short-term goals.** One issue with working towards long-term goals is that they can sometimes take months or years to accomplish. If the goal is vague or infeasible, it may not be accomplished at all. In addition to setting long-term SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time-bound), set short goals to provide a sense of accomplishment along the way. For example, if your long-term goal is to give a keynote presentation at a conference six months from now, you may feel unmotivated to prepare for the talk because it can be difficult to justify working towards such a far-off goal with no immediate reward. As a solution, set yourself smaller goals to reward progress along the way and sustain your motivation (e.g., you can reward yourself for finishing a course on public speaking by booking a weekend getaway).
- 3. Remove temptations from your surroundings.** One effective strategy to help reduce the allure of instant gratification is to remove tempting objects from your surroundings. For example, if you find yourself easily sidetracked by your busy inbox, you can mute the notifications on your email settings. There are also many helpful tools online to help monitor your productivity, such as setting timers for uninterrupted work, booking meetings with yourself, and locking social media websites from access during work hours.

## Resources



[The Battle Between Your Present and Future Self](#)



[Breaking the Email Addiction](#)



Develop your delayed gratification skills 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> Gschwandtner, A., Jewell, S., & Kambhampati, U. S. (2021). Lifestyle and life satisfaction: The role of delayed gratification. *Journal of Happiness Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-021-00440-y>

<sup>2</sup> He, Q. An, Q., & Li, M. (2015). How vocational delay of gratification affects employees' job performance: Organizational climate as a moderator. *Journal of Service Science and Management*, 8(5), 766-772.

<sup>3</sup> Mohsin, F. Z., & Ayub, N. (2014). The relationship between procrastination, delay of gratification, and job satisfaction among high school teachers. *Japanese Psychological Research*, 56(3), 224-234.

<sup>4</sup> Hershfield, H. E. (2013). Future self-continuity: How conceptions of the future self transform intertemporal choice. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1235, 30-43.