# SIGMA
# Leadership Series

# Self-Discipline in the Workplace

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# GREAT LEADERS EXERCISE SELF-DISCIPLINE

> **" I think self-discipline is something, it's like a muscle. The more you exercise it, the stronger it gets.**
>
> **— Daniel Goldstein**

In general, leaders are required to juggle responsibilities, including managing others, delegating work, engaging in problem solving or conflict resolution, and working on their own tasks and goals. With competing priorities, it can be difficult for a leader to find an unbroken block of time to focus their attention on any given task. Self-discipline is the ability to resist impulses, maintain focus, and see projects through to completion. It is categorized by a leader's persistence and willpower in dedicating their attention to a task until it is satisfactorily finished. Leaders who are high on self-discipline are not easily distracted, and can maintain concentration despite other priorities or requirements for their attention.

Self-discipline at work not only allows leaders to give their full attention to the task at hand, but research has also shown that leaders with a strong sense of self-control and persistence are more likely to be diligent[1] and engaged in their work[2]. In addition, setting aside dedicated time to work on certain tasks shows direct reports two things: first, it signals the kinds of tasks or projects that are of priority to their leaders, and second, it indicates that their leaders are willing and able to roll up their sleeves and commit themselves to their work. Not only is self-discipline an effective tool for leaders looking to accomplish more work each day, but it can be motivating for employees who follow the example set by their leader.

In assessing your level of self-discipline, ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I setting myself goals for what I want to accomplish each day?
- Do I take breaks throughout the day?
- Have I taken steps to limit the distractions and temptations that hinder my progress?
- Do I give myself a reasonable amount of time to complete tasks?
- Am I effectively delegating work and decision-making where possible?
- Am I mindful in my day-to-day work routine?

## Improve Your Self-Discipline

**Remember the rules of motivation:** There are a few tips from the motivation and goal setting literature that can help you improve your persistence at work[3]. First, where possible, set your

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own goals. They should be large enough that achieving the goal creates a sense of accomplishment, but small enough that they are realistic and achievable. Breaking a large goal into smaller, more manageable pieces can help sustain your motivation over time. If you have a goal that is personally interesting and motivating, you will find it easier to direct your attention and time toward accomplishing this goal. When you successfully complete a goal, either small and large, be sure to take the time to reward your efforts. The cycle of setting meaningful goals, working toward these goals, and celebrating your successes can sustain your motivation and interest in your tasks, and help you maintain focus and effort for longer periods of time.

**Take frequent breaks:** Self-discipline is like a muscle. We can grow and improve our strength with practice, but we can also grow tired, and find our ability to remain in control exhausted. The more we use our self-control in a day, the more we find this resource depletes[4]. Fortunately, as with our muscles, taking a break from your work is a simple strategy to regain that lost discipline and focus. Not only should we schedule regular breaks, taking time to step away from desks or computers, but leaders should schedule breaks that are appropriate to the work they tackle each day. For example, if you notice that certain tasks leave you drained or tired, consider scheduling this task at a time where you can immediately follow it with a long break or with work that requires little active self-control. Try to keep track of how your tasks make you feel, this will allow you to more effectively schedule your time to get the most out of your day and your self-control. Remember, the kinds of tasks that a leader finds particularly challenging or exhausting will differ across individuals, so your schedule for work and subsequent breaks should be personal to your own needs and interests.

**Remove temptations and distractions:** Like many skills, self-discipline is best improved with frequent practice. It is a learned behavior, not an inherent ability, that we can train ourselves to engage in it more often. One of the best ways to set yourself up for success is to remove the things that you find distract you from your work. This may look different across individuals. For some, shutting the door to their office may be enough to help sustain their attention. For others, silencing emails, turning off cell phones, or blocking tempting websites are better strategies to maintaining focus. To begin the process of eliminating distractions, go about your day as you normally would. Every time your attention is taken from your task, make a note of what distracted you. Over a few days, you will see patterns or categories of distractions emerge, and identifying these will help you decide how to avoid them. Remember, changing how you work will take time, so be patient as you eliminate distractions from your work day – competing priorities and urgent tasks are often a fact of life for leaders, and sometimes, distractions will be inevitable. Self-discipline will help you maintain your focus in the face of nonessential interruptions.

## Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Increase Self-Discipline

The following steps can help you increase your self-control in the workplace:

1. **Make time to make decisions.** Decision-making is one of those tasks that often fall exclusively on to leaders. This includes everything from choosing how to allocate resources, focusing the priorities of your unit, and assigning work to each employee.

Research has shown that decision-making is a tiring task, and that leaders find it difficult to retain self-control and focus after making important decisions[5]. Treat decision-making as any other task: give yourself an appropriate amount of time to focus on making the right choice as well as to recover from any stress that may result from this task. Forcing yourself to make important decisions while balancing other priorities will only ensure that you feel overwhelmed, contributes to low self-control.

2. **Reduce the load.** While decision-making may often fall to leaders, delegation is an important tool in preventing yourself from becoming overloaded. Where possible, have your employees aid in decision making, either by gathering more information that will help you to make correct choices, or by offering their opinions and expertise. Not only does this reduce the amount of effort required from a leader, the literature also suggests that participation in some decision-making can improve the long-term self-discipline and motivation in employees[5]. Delegating some of the work that goes into decision-making can be mutually beneficial for yourself and your employees.

3. **Practice mindful meditation.** Mindfulness meditation is gaining popularity within the world of work, and is often suggested as a solution to a host of organizational problems. However, good mindfulness training helps you to improve your focus by learning to concentrate on a fixed point, such as your breath, while letting emotions or thoughts pass by without effecting you. Daily mediation can have various positive effects for leaders, but in the case of self-discipline, individual mindfulness practice reduces impulsivity, helping you to retain your focus and control throughout the day[6]. SIGMA offers an 8-week online guided mindfulness mediation course that can help you develop your skills in mindfulness, and thus helping to improve your self-discipline at work.

## Resources

watch [The Science Behind Mindfulness Mediation](#)

read [5 Proven Methods for Gaining Self Discipline](#)

develop **Develop** your self-discipline 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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