

SIGMA

Leadership Series



**Great Leaders
Are Sensitive**



GREAT LEADERS ARE SENSITIVE

“ We think we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy. Yet listening of this very special kind is one of the most potent forces for change that I know.

— Carl Rogers

Although one role of a leader is to oversee projects, being sensitive to the emotional needs of your followers is key to maximizing your leadership effectiveness. Despite what some may think, being sensitive does not mean being a pushover. Rather, it means being understanding and warm while remaining firm about your expectations. When you lead with compassion, you foster trust with your followers and allow them to take responsibility for their actions and projects. Given the high cost of turnover, sensitive leaders also benefit the organization's bottom line by keeping top talent at the organization.

Individuals high in **Sensitivity** show compassion toward others. As a component of emotional intelligence, sensitivity involves showing a supportive, considerate, and caring attitude toward the needs, concerns, moods, priorities, interests, and aspirations of others. Leaders who are sensitive make an effort to understand the experiences, perspectives, and emotional needs of their employees.

Do You Have Sensitivity?

In assessing your ability to be sensitive to others, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I try to see events from the perspectives of my employees?
- How can I promote an environment that views mistakes as learning opportunities?
- Am I taking the time to recognize and appreciate the achievements of my followers?
- Do I demonstrate genuine interest in the lives of my employees?
- Am I engaging in active listening when communicating with my employees?
- Do I interact with my employees in ways that are honest and constructive?

Improve Your Sensitivity

Put yourself in other people's shoes. Empathy involves imagining yourself in another person's situation, understanding their emotions and point of view. In addition to what people say, pay attention to other people's facial expressions, gestures, and body language. These nonverbal cues can provide valuable information on what others are thinking and feeling and can help you see things through the eyes of your employees. Sensitive leaders use these insights to adjust their behavior to the emotions, needs, and preferences of their followers.¹

Remember that your followers are only human. Nobody is perfect — even the best employees make mistakes and have bad days. Build a climate of trust by acknowledging your own oversights and treating mistakes as learning opportunities. When your followers trust you, they are more likely to acknowledge errors, rather than cover up their mistakes. Setting a compassionate tone involves being forgiving of mistakes, while still holding your followers accountable for their actions.

Be generous with your praise. It is easy to focus on giving feedback that highlights areas of improvement. However, people also like having their work appreciated and their achievements recognized. When giving praise, be sincere and specific — otherwise it may come across as empty flattery. Even a simple “thank you” or handwritten note can express gratitude. Research shows that employees value personalized recognition.² Additionally, when employees look up to their leaders, they feel stronger loyalty to the organization and are more likely to go the extra mile at work.³

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Be More Sensitive

The following steps can help you become better at interpersonal sensitivity:

1. **Build rapport with your followers.** As a leader, your team is your best resource. Being sensitive involves caring about your employees outside of work and getting to know them as people. Ask your direct reports about their day, and remember what they share with you. Showing genuine interest in the lives and well-being of your followers also helps build trust. In turn, this means they will come to you for support more often, such as to bring issues to your attention, or highlight obstacles interfering with their work. In a supportive work environment, employees are more engaged and are less likely to leave the organization, reducing turnover.⁴
2. **Practice active listening.** A key part of sensitivity is the ability to effectively listen. Active listening involves paying attention to what other people tell you with the intention of understanding them, helping them, or learning something new.⁵ People want to know that they have been heard and respected. Reflective listening is also a key part of other leadership skills, including communication and conflict management. Leaders who listen have more satisfied employees and more positive leader-follower relationships.^{6, 7}

3. **Deliver difficult messages with a gentle touch.** In interacting with others, remember that the *delivery* is just as important as the *message*. This is true whether in the context of giving feedback, managing conflict, or dealing with a sensitive issue. Be mindful of how others may interpret your words, tone of voice and body language. When thinking of how to best convey your message, imagine how you would feel if on the receiving end, especially if it is bad news. Likewise, in difficult situations, when your emotions are becoming difficult to control, take a break. This will give yourself time to regain your composure and calm down so you can continue to respond with sensitivity to your employees.

Assess Sensitivity With the LSP-R®

The [Leadership Skills Profile – Revised® \(LSP-R\)](#) is a personality-based leadership assessment that measures 50 core competencies, including Sensitivity. The assessment can be administered online in 25 minutes, and comes with an automatically generated Focus Report, including scores, personalized feedback, and templates for creating competency-based leadership development plans (view a [sample Focus Report](#)).

LSP-R® Free Trial

See how you score on SENSITIVITY.

Experience the LSP-R for yourself and see how you score on Sensitivity. Receive customized feedback and templates for creating a personalized action plan. Take 25 minutes and experience the impact that data-driven personality insights can have.

➤ Start Your [Free Trial](#)

Learn More



[Understanding Empathy](#)



[Assessment: Are You a Compassionate Leader?](#)



Develop leadership competencies with SIGMA's one-hour, high-impact [Leadership Development Workshops](#), led by our experienced coaches.

References

- ¹ Schmid Mast, M., & Hall, J. A. (2018). The impact of interpersonal accuracy on behavioral outcomes. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 27, 309-314.
- ² Luthans, K. (2000). Recognition: A powerful, but often overlooked, leadership tool to improve employee performance. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 7, 31-39.
- ³ Vianello, M., Galliani, E. M., & Haidt, J. (2010). Elevation at work: The effects of leaders' moral excellence. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 5, 390-411.
- ⁴ Kundu, S. C., & Lata, K. (2017). Effects of supportive work environment on employee retention: Mediating role of organizational engagement. *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, 25, 703-722.
- ⁵ McKay, M., Davis, M., & Fanning, P. (2009). *Messages: The communication skills book*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- ⁶ Schmid Mast, M., Jonas, K., Cronauer, C. K., & Darioly, A. (2012). On the importance of the superior's interpersonal sensitivity for good leadership. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 42, 1043-1068.
- ⁷ Lloyd, K. J., Boer, D., & Voelpel, S. C. (2017). From listening to leading: Toward an understanding of supervisor listening within the framework of leader-member exchange theory. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 54, 431-451.