

SIGMALeader

360 Leadership Assessment



Leadership Series

Great Leaders
Have Self-Esteem



GREAT LEADERS HAVE SELF-ESTEEM

“ You have been criticizing yourself for years, and it hasn't worked. Try approving of yourself and see what happens.

— Louise L. Hay

In the course of being a leader, all individuals will experience negative feedback, make mistakes, or fail to achieve their goals. How people react to and deal with these events, either positively or negatively, is a reflection of their self-esteem. Self-esteem is a person's attitude towards one's abilities and worth as a person. Leaders with high self-esteem both accept themselves as they are (self-liking) and believe themselves to be capable and possessing of good qualities (self-competence)¹. High self-esteem buffers individuals against the emotional pain that comes from making mistakes, receiving criticism, or facing social rejection². Leaders with high self-esteem can accept positive feedback graciously, receive negative feedback without taking it personally, forgive themselves for mistakes, and bounce back from failure³.

Self-esteem involves having a positive sense of self-worth and believing in one's own competence. Leaders with high self-esteem are not narcissistic or over-confident. Instead, they are secure in their strengths while recognizing areas for self-improvement. Rather than shy away from potential failure or rejection, individuals with high self-esteem are willing to take risks and face challenges³.

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

- Do I believe that I am deserving of happiness and respect?
- Am I confident in my ability to overcome challenges and obstacles?
- Do I set realistic expectations for myself and accept the possibility of failure?
- Do I acknowledge my strengths while also accepting my development opportunities?
- Am I forgiving and compassionate to myself when I make mistakes?
- Do I accept compliments graciously and without deflecting them?

Improve Your Self-Perception

Be patient with yourself: The most important thing to keep in mind about boosting your self-esteem is that stable, long-term improvements to self-esteem do not happen overnight. It will take time and effort to undo years of conditioned negative thought patterns and replace them with healthier, more positive ones. However, habits that have been learned can also be unlearned. Self-perceptions can be gradually shifted to be more supportive, realistic, and positive.

Avoid dwelling on the negative: Research suggests that focusing on positive aspects of yourself can improve self-esteem, while dwelling on negative aspects of yourself can worsen it⁴. Negativity is also contagious. Leaders who focus on their failures may indirectly create a pessimistic culture that is overly critical of mistakes, resulting in stress for their direct reports.

Remember that you don't have to be perfect: It is admirable to have high standards, but it is unrealistic and unhealthy to constantly demand perfection of yourself. It is also unreasonable to expect perfection from your co-workers and direct reports. Nobody likes making mistakes or feeling vulnerable. However, if one's self-esteem is contingent upon external factors, such as achieving perfection or being liked and approved of by other people, then it is fragile and easily lost^{3, 5}. Being good enough does not mean being perfect: mistakes are an inevitable part of being human. Instead of engaging in self-blame, frame mistakes as learning opportunities.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Improve Your Self-Esteem

The following steps can help you to improve your self-esteem:

- 1. Turn off the inner critic.** Everyone has an inner voice, but people with low self-esteem have a louder, more critical one. This inner critic may downplay successes as happening by chance and brush off compliments, while also catastrophizing perceived failures, mistakes, and shortcomings. Listening to the inner critic can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies: for example, feeling unworthy of a job promotion may inhibit an employee from applying and being considered for the position, or feeling rejected by peers may lead to socially withdrawing from them, thus worsening interpersonal relations. To silence the inner critic, it is necessary to first recognize situations that trigger it and identify how the inner critic is distorting information. When doubts or critical thoughts arise, stop and confront them. Are they true, or is it the critic talking? Are there other possible interpretations of the situation? Would you say those things to a friend, colleague, or direct report? Counter negative thoughts by replacing them with positive affirmations that reinforce the message of being a good, worthwhile person⁶.
- 2. Practice self-compassion.** Where the inner critic punishes harshly and constantly over mistakes, self-compassion involves understanding, accepting, and forgiving yourself. Understanding means evaluating your inner voice and asking yourself why negative thoughts are occurring. This can involve identifying beliefs (e.g. anything imperfect is failure) or emotions (e.g. fear of rejection) that bring out the inner critic. Accepting

means considering your thoughts, feelings, and actions without judgment or blame. One strategy is to frame negative thoughts or beliefs as neutral, value-free facts. For example, instead of labelling yourself a failure for missing a deadline, acknowledge that mistakes happen and that more time should be dedicated to the task in the future. Finally, forgiveness means recognizing that although the past cannot be changed, the future can. It involves letting go of mistakes and the guilt, sadness, or self-directed anger that may accompany them. It also means acknowledging that you're doing your best. This may be challenging, as the inner critic is harsh, loud, and biased. Over time and with practice, thought patterns can become more self-compassionate⁶.

- 3. Learn to accept compliments.** Compliments can make individuals with low self-esteem uncomfortable as they may perceive the praise as undeserved or false. This is because positive feedback usually contradicts one's own negative self-perceptions. It is easier to discount a single compliment than it is to undo the automatic programming of negative self-talk⁷. Accepting a compliment does not mean that you are egotistical; rather, accepting a compliment graciously is a demonstration of humility and appreciation. Instead of replying with, "That's not true," or "I got lucky," say, "Thank you," even if you don't believe it. Keep in mind that in addition to hurting your self-esteem, you are indirectly insulting the other person by telling them that they are wrong about their perception of you. A compliment is an acknowledgement of your strengths—allow yourself recognition for a job well done.

Resources



[Self-Esteem – Understanding and Fixing Low Self-Esteem](#)



[Five Ways to Build Lasting Self-Esteem](#)



Develop your self-esteem by taking advantage of SIGMA's coaching services.

Contact SIGMA for coaching on developing your skills as a leader.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.

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