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## OPEN MINDED LEADERS

by Dr Victor S.L. Tan

Much emphasis in organisations today has been on developing skills and less on developing an open mind. Leaders pride themselves in these skill building initiatives, however, the results are less than desirable. Fewer ideas are implemented because leaders are not open to the better ones.

The beginning of improvement initiatives, such as learning organisation, team building, six sigma, balanced scorecard and key performance indicators, must begin with an open mind.

The following are six ways for leaders to adapt an open mind.

### BEGIN WITH NO ATTACHED POINT OF VIEW

To have an open mind, it is good to be non-committal to any point of view. This requires one to remain impartial. There is nothing wrong about considering many point views without being attached to them. Aristotle said: "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it". The greatest danger is when a leader has a strong idea on how things are to be done and he gets emotionally attached to it. This will result in people aligning their views according to the leader, irrespective of its merit.

### ALLOW PEOPLE TO QUESTION EXISTING ASSUMPTIONS

You can easily assess the level of openness of a leader's mind by how he or she allows people to question existing assumptions. The problem with existing assumptions is that if left unchecked, they may no longer be relevant or true. Assumptions that were proven right in the past may no longer be so because the environment changes. For example, a

few years ago, customers may be pleased with a firm's level of services, however it may no longer be true now, in view of better services offered by competitors. Isaac Asimov, an author of more than 500 books said: "Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in a while, or the light won't come in."

Customer expectations, technology, economic condition, social values and global factors do not remain the same with the passage of time. The only way leaders can stay relevant at the speed of change is to allow others to question outdated assumptions and take appropriate actions to align to the reality of the current workplace and marketplace.

### GET THE EGO OUT OF THINKING

Ego often closes the minds of leaders and stop their learning altogether. If a leader perceives that he is more superior and knowledgeable than others, he will take lightly of the views and ideas of others. An egoistic leader will prove that he is right rather than find a better way to do things. To continue to grow and learn, leaders must make it a point to have their ego take a back seat when they are in discussions with others. They must adopt a humble approach towards seeking new knowledge and learning. They should emulate the disposition of the great scientist, Isaac Newton, who said: "I do not know what I may appear to the world. But to myself, I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me".

### ELIMINATE FEAR

Fear stifles new ideas. It cows people into accepting whatever the leader proposes. It diminishes the value of education, knowledge and expertise. It encourages groupthink and narrow view. Organisations that have the element of fear in their corporate culture promote self-censorship. People quickly will filter out what they think the management does not want to hear and present only what appear sweet to their leaders' ears. The best way to open people's minds is to close the door to fear in the meeting room.

### ASK FOR AT LEAST THREE PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO A PROBLEM

To help leaders keep an open mind to new ideas, it will be good to consider at least three possible solutions to a problem. After all, in a procurement department, professional practice requires that there are at least three quotations in a bid to consider before making a decision. Likewise, for a leader to have an open and professional assessment, it may be a good idea to have at least three different proposed solutions before deciding on the proper course of action.

### SUSPEND ALL JUDGMENT

Charles Kettering, an American businessman, engineer and inventor who held 186 patents, said it very well: "It's amazing what ordinary people can do if they set out without preconceived notions. Where there is an open mind, there will always be a frontier."

Preconceived notions are the locks to the door to better ideas. Many ideas are killed before they have the chance to show their true merits. Too often leaders judge the person first before his idea. To

encourage varied views, and new and different ideas, it is good to suspend all judgment, no matter how tempting they may appear at times. Leaders who suspend their judgment of ideas and suggestions for improvements show their sincerity of being open to feedback. With this approach, everyone is free to communicate openly and, often, the truth and reality emerges.

### ENCOURAGE THIRD PARTY INDEPENDENT VIEW

It is easier for people to have an open mind if views provided are from those who have independent views and no conflict of interest. It is good to involve a third party to provide their views or ideas without fear or favour. The third party can be an external consultant who has expertise in the field, but who has no interest in the decision to be made.

It makes sense to develop an open mind when leaders are at the exploring stage of getting new ideas. Divergent thinking, which involves looking at as many options as possible, and many different ideas are important prior to decision making stage. This is to ensure quality decisions are made and are based on sound sources of input and options those who know.




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