

# SIGMA Radius

360 Leadership Assessment



Leadership Series

Great Leaders  
Stay Objective



## GREAT LEADERS STAY OBJECTIVE WHEN MAKING DECISIONS

“**Dispassionate objectivity is itself a passion, for the real and for the truth.**

**– Abraham Maslow**

Objectivity is required in many areas of a leader’s role. First, leaders must be objective when making decisions about who to hire or select for an open position or promotion. They must also be objective when reviewing the performance of employees. When employee decisions are made on subjective sources of information, the decisions will be influenced by the leader’s personal thoughts, opinions, and judgments. Similarly, in daily interactions with employees, from social nuances to outright conflict, a leader must always manage their direct reports in a fair, consistent manner. Leaders who do not base their decisions on facts will not be trusted as a just and reliable source of support for employees.

Objectivity is the ability to maintain a realistic perspective and keep personal biases to a minimum. Leaders who are objective avoid using their own judgments and interpretations when faced with a situation or decision, instead relying on facts or data. Personal biases can come from many sources, such as previous experiences, personal history, and interpersonal conflicts, and all can influence one’s ability to be objective.

### **Are You Doing All You Can to Stay Objective?**

In assessing your objectivity, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I consider all the available information before making a decision?
- Is there a way I could make use of observable data in my daily managerial duties?
- Do I let my decisions be influenced by my personal opinions or experiences?
- Do I hold biases that influence my behavior at work?
- Have I overreacted in ambiguous situations?
- Do I rely on my judgment when making decisions?

## Three Ways to Stay Objective When Making Decisions

**Understand the definition and purpose of biases:** The word “bias” often has a negative connotation; however, cognitive biases are a tool to improve human processing speed and to help us make quick decisions. These tools prevent us from having to think about every variable in every decision, and may help us assess situations in the blink of an eye. For leaders, however, decisions may require more careful thought and deliberation than allowed using cognitive shortcuts. While some individuals hold biases against groups of people, based on gender, race, or other demographic characteristics, there are a number of other cognitive biases that could potentially influence a leader. For example, people can be predisposed to like or dislike certain individuals based on personality, mood, or past experiences. In addition, some individuals generally have a more negative or more positive mindset that biases all their thought patterns. Biases can be subtle or so pervasive that an individual has difficulty recognizing them as such.

**Identify your bias:** Every individual has some kind of biases, and the most effective way to overcome a bias is to recognize it as such. By acknowledging their biases, a leader can be aware of their tendency to react a certain way to specific individuals or situations, and can correct their behavior accordingly. Biases can be a major issue when they are sub-conscious and influence leader behaviors in unknown ways. Recognizing biases is the first step in preventing them from affecting behavior.

**Recognize the value of subjectivity:** The need for objectivity during decision making or conflict resolution does not mean that subjectivity has no place in the workforce. Even highly objective leaders need to insert emotion or subjectivity into their interactions with employees, as this is how strong, positive workplace relationships are formed. Subjectivity is also often used when leaders are asked to make judgment calls based on their prior experiences or education. Simply remember that objectivity is required when making decisions about employees, such as hiring, promoting, or firing, as well as in interactions where emotions may be running high, such as conflict resolution.

## Objectivity in Action

The following steps can help you to be more objective at work:

1. **When faced with a conflict or difficult decision, take your time before reacting.** Given that biases are a cognitive tool used in quick decision making, pausing for a moment or two can override the impulse to react judgmentally. Objective leaders have the ability to take a minute, reflect on their impulses, and temper their responses to be fair and even-handed. This not only helps in remaining level-headed in high pressure situations, but also prevents damage to the leader-follower relationship. When employees believe their leader is biased for or against certain individuals, they no longer see their leader as fair, and the positive relationship between the leader and direct report is affected.

Given that this positive relationship is needed for leaders to effectively motivate and manage their employees, avoiding using judgment can prevent long-lasting implications for the leader.

- 2. Consider all the available information.** Biases are useful in cases where information is missing. When faced with these situations, it is better to attempt to collect or consider more information than relying on these cognitive tools. For example, many interpersonal issues occur when one individual interprets the intentions or motivations of another. Instead of attempting these interpretations, leaders should consider the possibilities, such as the context in which the situation is occurring, or possible alternative explanations to their biases. For example, if a leader perceives their employee is being rude or difficult, rather than attributing this to characteristics of the employee, they should consider the employees' life outside work, or their stress level due to work demands. Be careful not to project your own anxieties or fears onto others, as this can quickly lead to communication breakdowns between employees.
- 3. Where possible, use numbers or hard facts.** One of the easiest ways to avoid acting on your biases is to use hard data. Data can be used in a number of leadership tasks, such as hiring, promoting, or firing individuals. The interview is one area where biases and subjective opinions often influence administrative decisions. Scoring each candidate interview on the same job-relevant criteria is an excellent way to ensure you hire the person best suited to the job, and not the individual you got along with best. Often, we like people who are similar to us, so our biases may prevent us from choosing an individual with valuable experiences or diverse perspectives. Making decisions based on numbers, rather than feelings, gives a justification for making certain choices, and is hard to argue with. Just remember, not all numbers are created equal. Often, performance ratings produce a score for each individual, but these scores may be based on a supervisor's subjective ratings of an employee. Information on countable things, such as sales volume, days absent, or number of tasks completed is a better source of objective data.

## Resources



[Entrepreneurs and Objective Leadership](#)



[Don't Let Emotions Screw Up Your Decisions](#)



Develop your ability to stay objective and other leadership skills by taking advantage of SIGMA's [Coaching Services](#).

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

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