

PSYCHOLOGY

A New Way to Become More Open-Minded

by [Shane Snow](#)

November 20, 2018



Danae Diaz/Getty Images

Benjamin Franklin knew he was smart — smarter than most of his peers — but he was also intelligent enough to understand that he couldn't be right about everything. That's why he said that whenever he was about to make an argument, he would open with something along the lines of, "I could be wrong, but..." Saying this put people at ease and helped them to take disagreements less personally. But it also helped him to psychologically prime himself to be open to new ideas.

History shows that we tend to choose political and business leaders who are stoic, predictable, and unflinching, but research indicates that the leadership we need is characterized by the opposite: creativity and flexibility. We need people who can be like Franklin — that is, smart and strong-willed enough to persuade people to do great things, but flexible enough to think differently, admit when they're wrong, and adapt to dynamic conditions. Changing our methods and minds is hard, but it's important in an era where threats of disruption are always on the horizon. In popular culture, we might call this kind of cognitive flexibility, "open-mindedness." And with growing divisions in society, the survival of our businesses and communities may very well depend on our leaders having that flexibility — from Congress to the C-Suite.

Unfortunately, for decades academics have argued in circles about the definition of open-mindedness, and what might make a person become less or more open-minded, in part because there's been no reliable way to measure these things. Recently, however, psychologists have given us a better way to think about open-mindedness — and quantify it.

The breakthrough happened when researchers started playing with a concept from religion called “intellectual humility.” Philosophers had been studying why some people stubbornly cling to spiritual beliefs even when presented with evidence that they should abandon them, and why others will instead quickly adopt new beliefs. Intellectual humility, the philosophers said, is the virtue that sits between those two excesses; it’s the willingness to change, plus the wisdom to know when you shouldn’t.

A few years ago, scientists from various universities started porting this idea into the realm of everyday psychology. Then in 2016, professors from Pepperdine University broke the concept of intellectual humility down into four components and published an assessment to measure them:

1. Having respect for other viewpoints
2. Not being intellectually overconfident
3. Separating one’s ego from one’s intellect
4. Willingness to revise one’s own viewpoint

An intellectually humble person will score high on all of these counts. But by breaking it down like this, the Pepperdine professors came up with a clever way to help pinpoint what gets in the way when we’re not acting very open-minded. (I, for example, scored low on separating my ego from my intellect — ouch!)

Still, philosophers focused on these concepts think there is one more piece to the puzzle. “I’m fussy about this,” explains Jason Baehr of Loyola Marymount University. He defines open-mindedness as the characteristic of being “willing and within limits able to transcend a default cognitive standpoint in order to take up

seriously the merits of a distinct cognitive standpoint.” His point is that you can be intellectually humble (open to changing your mind about things), but if you’re never curious enough to listen to other viewpoints, you aren’t really that open-minded.

There is however, Dr. Baehr points out, a trait from the time-tested Big 5 Personality Assessment that helps fill in that gap. The trait is “openness to experience,” or a willingness to try new things or take in new information. If openness to experience means you’re willing to try pickle-flavored ice cream, intellectual humility means you’re willing to admit you like it, even if you initially thought you wouldn’t. A person who scores high on both of these will be likely to listen to people, no matter who they are, and have a kind of Ben Franklin-like cognitive flexibility after listening.

For my recent book, *Dream Teams*, I combined these two assessments — the Pepperdine Intellectual Humility test and the Big 5 Openness to Experience test — and conducted a series of studies of thousands of American workers with it to find correlations between open-minded people and the way they live and work. You can take that assessment here. The results indicated that most people overestimate themselves: 95 percent of people rated themselves as more open-minded than average, which, of course, cannot be true! But this suggests that most leaders don’t know how much of a blind spot intellectual humility is in their work.

My studies showed that certain activities generally correlate with higher intellectual humility across the board. Traveling a lot — or, even better, living for extended periods in foreign cultures — tends to make us more willing to revise our viewpoints. After all, if we know that it is perfectly valid to live a different way

than we do, it makes sense that our brains would be better at accepting new approaches to problems at work. This aligns with recent research on the neuroscience of how storytelling helps us build empathy for other people. ([Read neuroeconomist Paul Zak's HBR article on this fascinating subject here.](#)) Fiction readers tend to score higher in intellectual humility, perhaps because their brains are a little bit better trained to seek out stories that vary from their own, and see characters' experiences and opinions as potentially valid. Preliminary research is also showing us that practicing mindfulness meditation, [learning about the ins and outs of your own ego using a framework like the Enneagram](#), and learning about [Moral Foundations Theory](#) through programs like [Open Mind Platform](#) can each help us operate with more intellectual humility.

There's a lot more work to be done exploring ways to increase our intellectual humility — including research on how to definitively increase scores on each of the factors — but in the meantime, Ben Franklin demonstrated at least one hack we can all use right away: Because he wanted to learn and grow, he worked to deflate his own intellectual confidence. That trick of saying, “I could be wrong, but...” wasn't just a way to get his conversational opponents to be less defensive; it was also a way of forcing himself to be open to changing his mind. After all, if someone countered his argument and won, he could still say, “See! I was right! I said, ‘I could be wrong,’ and I was!”

Shane Snow is author of [Dream Teams: Working Together Without Falling Apart](#) and other books applying science lessons to business.

This article is about PSYCHOLOGY

 Follow This Topic

Related Topics: [Decision Making](#) | [Creativity](#)

Comments

Leave a Comment



Post Comment

15 COMMENTS

Tahir Usman a year ago

Mind stimulating

 Reply

1  0 

 [Join The Conversation](#)

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.