

# How Openminded Are You?

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If you are like most people, you consider “stubbornness” to be a negative trait. You wouldn’t want to be perceived as stubborn. It might make you think of the proverbial mule who won’t budge no matter how hard he is pushed or pulled. People who are stubborn are generally closeminded, opposed to new ways of thinking and doing, and generally stuck in their own comfort zone. They are complacent which over time leads to irrelevance and obsolescence.

The opposite of stubbornness or close-mindedness is open-mindedness. People who are openminded are generally open to new ways of thinking and doing. They are capable of considering opposing opinions. They can understand the pros and cons of other’s ideas as well as their own. They can imagine outcomes that might be different from what they have expected and experienced in the past.

Since most view open-mindedness as preferable to close-mindedness, most consider themselves to be openminded. Yet many people consider others to be closeminded. So how can most people be openminded if many people consider others to be closeminded? The answer, like in so many human traits, is that we see ourselves better than we see others and generally better than we really are. We filter the world we see through our many biases, and yes, we consider ourselves less biased than others too. We just don’t see ourselves very objectively and therefore not very accurately.

If you can admit to not knowing yourself as objectively and accurately as you might want, you are probably more openminded than most. Well done. Yet, can you assess how open-minded you are? For example, at the most fundamental level of your being, your core values, are you open to different views? Are you open to considering changes to your core beliefs in areas such as religion, politics, the environment, or diversity? Or how about being open to changes in areas not as deep-seated as your core values such as your views on where to go on vacation or what to eat for dinner? Or how openminded are you to trying new methods, starting new hobbies, or spending time with new people?

Here is another test of your open-mindedness. If you are quick to think “I’ve always done it this way and I prefer my way” instead of thinking “I’d like to try a new way”, you probably have a tendency to be closeminded. Or more telling, if you generally think “If it isn’t broke, why should I change it”, you most likely have a tendency to be closeminded. But in your defense, is being closeminded always a bad trait? Of course not. When it comes to taking risks, especially risks that can have significant downsides, being closeminded can be lifesaving. Being closeminded can prevent catastrophic losses and accidents.

So what is a healthy level of open-mindedness? When would it make sense for most people to be closeminded versus openminded? Listed below are a few principles to keep in mind to maintain a healthy level of open-mindedness. Use these as a checklist to assess how openminded you truly are:

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- Appreciate innovation and creativity. Value curiosity and experimentation. Know that improvements to products, methods, people, and society come from trying new things. Challenge your tendency to resist change just because you've always done something a certain way. Appreciate that your personal and professional growth comes through trying new ways of thinking and doing.
- Give yourself a chance to think before reacting to others' ideas and opinions. Your instinct might be telling you to disagree with someone, but your instinct is full of biases. So before immediately reacting, give your conscious brain a chance to think and overrule the subconscious part of your brain. Give yourself a chance to think logically rather than react instinctively. Your instinct can be overly influenced by emotions as well as biases.
- Intercept any tendency to say "no" before considering what was said. If you subconsciously default to saying "no", recognize your tendency. Replace "no" with something like "tell me more" or "let's talk about that". Seek to fully understand what someone is saying including their "why", "what", and "how" before making your decision to support their idea or not.
- Consider adopting the habit of saying "yes" before saying "no." Adopt a philosophy that says "unless this is bad for my health, bad for others, illegal, unethical, against my core values, or overly risky, I'll try it." So when someone asks you to see a different genre of movie, read a different type of book, go on an adventure trip, or try a new cuisine from what you would normally eat, say "yes."
- When others' ideas seem obviously bad, even to the most openminded person, don't be too quick to offer your opposing opinion. Make the other person feel valued and heard rather than wrong for offering their idea. Show empathy for them by saying something like "I can see that you have thought a lot about this" or "I can understand why you would want to try something different" before politely letting them know that you won't be pursuing their idea.
- Rather than ask yourself if someone's idea is feasible or not, ask yourself how risky it would be to try it. So rather than base your decision based on feasibility alone, assess how much downside an idea has. If the potential downside is not as high as the potential upside, which includes the benefit of learning, consider that an idea might be worth pursuing.
- When substantial risk is present in trying something new, be cautious. Something may still be worth pursuing, but probably deserves more time and analysis. Ask for more information. Talk to others. Ask for examples. Identify ways to mitigate the risks. Ask others to take more of the responsibility. Try building a prototype, see a demonstration, or test the idea out on a smaller scale before fully pursuing it on a large scale.

How well do you manifest these principles? Hopefully you do and therefore don't let complacency or stubbornness cause you to miss out on opportunities for improvement. Or miss out on opportunities to help others learn and feel valued. You hopefully aren't the proverbial mule who won't budge and whose first reaction is to resist trying anything new. Continue to embrace (or adopt) these principles of being openminded and enjoy the journey of expanded thought and experience.

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Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* ([www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com](http://www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com)), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches ([www.ScopeOfLeadership.com](http://www.ScopeOfLeadership.com)), and president of Alpine Link Corp ([www.AlpineLink.com](http://www.AlpineLink.com)), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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