

Flexibility relates to how willing and able someone is to accept, and even adopt, an unfamiliar perspective or viewpoint. It also concerns how a person deals with changes in their environment.

People with high levels of flexibility tend to be comfortable in new or unfamiliar situations, and are okay with on-the-fly, last minute changes. Rather than seeing change as a bad thing, they welcome the variety and the new opportunities that change may bring.

On the other hand, people with lower levels of flexibility struggle to change their ingrained behaviours. They like consistency, with everything running the way it always has. They don't like change, particularly at the last minute, and their immediate response is likely to be negative when someone suggests changing the way things normally run. As you can imagine, when two people work together, one with a low flexibility, and another with a high level, it can create some tensions.

I remember when a company I worked for restructured the parking at our office building. Employees had to park further from the front door, to leave spaces near the door for visitors. While the real impact on people was minimal, some were outraged by the change, demanding to know how and why it was happening. Others just shrugged their shoulders and went on with their work. Some of those most troubled by the change were still talking about it months later - they just could not get past it.

Those who simply shrugged off this change were demonstrating a higher level of Flexibility, while those who struggled with the change had a lower level of Flexibility.

When you consider your own flexibility, it's useful to think back to recent situations where an unexpected change occurred. When you first heard about the change, what was your initial reaction? Were you excited? Annoyed? Angry? Cautious? What was it that made you feel that way? Was it because the change was going to affect YOU, or was it because you felt that the change was unnecessary? Would more information have allowed you to be more flexible?

Your degree of Flexibility has a great deal to do with your level of emotional investment in the change. For example, imagine that someone told you your shift rotation or the core work hours for your job were going to be changed. You would probably have a great deal of emotional investment in such a significant change. Changes to a system you rarely used, however, would cause a different reaction.

This idea of emotional investment is important as it can help you understand, and be more prepared for, another person's reaction to something that you do. While it is an underlying principle of emotional intelligence that some people are more flexible than others, always keep in mind that the significance of a change to the other person, and their degree of emotional investment, will play a part as well.

To explore your own Flexibility, consider the following reflective questions:

1. Reflect back on a situation where you insisted that your perspective or approach was the correct one, but another course of action was taken because others did not agree with you. What was the situation? What was the outcome? Do you think the outcome would have been better, or worse, if your approach had been adopted? Why?

2. Think about the last time you really shifted your thinking or changed your mind about something significant in your life. What was the situation, and what was it that caused you to change your mind?
3. Think of someone in your life who you consider to be stubborn. What do you think causes them to be this way? Can you see any of these characteristics in yourself?

To build your Flexibility, try the following:

1. Choose a topic in which you consider your own level of expertise to be high. Now seek out and read an article that provides new or contrary thinking on this topic.
2. Try something new that you typically would not try, or that you have purposefully avoided. Food, for example, or music, or a different activity.
3. If you disagree with someone, ask them to explain their perspective and thinking on the issue, and then consider how and why their viewpoint is different from yours. Do not challenge or argue with them. Simply hear how their perspective is different and try to understand why that difference exists.

### Working With Others

Someone with a low level of Flexibility can be difficult to work with, as they push back hard on anything that is going to be different. We might call these people 'stubborn.' If you've spent time around someone with this personality characteristic, you'll appreciate how challenging they can be.

Here are three tips for working with people who have a low level of Flexibility:

1. Understand the comfort and reassurance they derive from tried and tested approaches to work, and how they will view any changes as problematic.

2. When you do need to implement change, be sure to reinforce the things that are NOT changing. As much as possible, provide very practical and concrete reasons for the change. Consider what this person may be losing when the change is implemented.
3. Understand that someone with a lower level of flexibility may take more time to get on board with a change. Be respectful of that. Where possible, give them the time they need to process the change.

Working with someone with an extremely high level of flexibility can be challenging, too. These people flit from one idea to another, seeming to change their mind on a whim. Their comfort with last minute changes can manifest as an inability to focus, or to stick with a process.

Here are three tips for working with people who have a high level of Flexibility:

1. Reinforce the need to follow processes and guidelines, but don't correct deviations if there isn't a concrete reason to do so.
2. Help them understand that improvements or changes don't just affect them. They may have great ideas, but they need to involve and engage the whole team before any changes are made.
3. Remind them that they are part of a team, and that their approaches to work need to fit in with the preferences and work styles of those around them. Changes just to accommodate their own work style may not be appropriate.