



How Leaders Can Cultivate Patience in an Impatient World

Nine ways to develop this important “muscle” and reap its mental health benefits.

The whole world is waiting for a coronavirus vaccine so that life can get back to normal. It feels like all of us are characters in *Waiting for Godot*. But unlike Samuel Beckett’s play, where the protagonists are waiting for something that probably will never happen, we can expect that a cure will be found. Until that time, much patience will be needed.

The pandemic has made us realise that patience is one of the more difficult challenges of being human. In more ways than one, the coronavirus has dramatically transformed our lives – and not necessarily for the better. For many of us, “cabin fever” has raised its ugly head, contributing to various mental health problems. Some of us may even have been quite sick, had a brush with death or had someone close to us die. It has been difficult to remain calm, cool and collected.

In our world of overnight delivery, fast food and overall instant gratification, many of us don’t even give ourselves the time to read a novel. Instead, we prefer to read short articles or watch YouTube clips. When our needs aren’t met immediately, we become frustrated.

Stress elevates our cortisol levels and triggers our flight or fight response. Impatience can transform leaders into agitated, poor decision makers. It can harm our reputation, damage our relationships and escalate already difficult situations. In sum,

Visit **INSEAD Knowledge**
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>

impatience is a root cause of much unhappiness in the world today.

Three types of patience

By contrast, what is patience? It is the ability to stay calm in the face of disappointment, adversity or distress. Having patience allows us to better process challenging situations. It helps us sort out our thoughts and bring our feelings under control. Patience reduces the risk of angry outbursts. It helps us not to resort to snap judgments, improving the quality of our decisions. Patient leaders have better relationships with their colleagues, friends and family.

Social psychologists differentiate between **three kinds of patience**. There is “interpersonal patience,” referring to the ability to face annoying people with equanimity. There is “life hardship patience,” which is the patience to overcome serious setbacks in life that are more of a long-term nature (like waiting for the outcome of a medical treatment or a possible job promotion). Finally, “daily hassles patience” refers to how we deal with trivial things, like getting stuck in traffic or facing long queues at the supermarket.

For those of us who weren’t born with patience, the good news is that patience can be learned. Some, without realising it, have already had the

opportunity to practice their patience by becoming parents. Whatever the case may be, here are nine ways to exercise your patience muscle to improve your life and decision-making abilities.

Discover your patience triggers

Your triggers could be specific people, situations or even certain words. Look for physical indicators suggesting that something has set you off, such as fast breathing, muscle tension and hand clenching. A sudden mood change can be another indicator. Recognising your impatience triggers is the first step before you can move on to some of the practices mentioned below.

Reframe the situation

Feeling impatient is not just an automatic emotional response; it also involves conscious thought processes. Therefore, you could consciously try to regulate your emotions by reframing challenging situations. Reframing is the art of looking at the bigger picture. Ask yourself: Will it matter in the long term? Will it matter even a few hours from now? You may realise that what's happening presently is not the end of the world.

Fantasise

Many situations are benign, simply requiring you to wait, such as queueing. Fill that time productively by daydreaming or using other forms of visualisation. Imagine places or situations that tend to make you happy or calm you down. You could also prepare ahead by imagining how your most confident, calm, collected self would handle such a situation. Subsequently, act like this imaginary person.

Practice empathy

When your impatience relates to the actions of someone else, empathy can go a long way. Being empathic requires giving up a self-centred view of the world; it implies that you pay attention to the feelings of another person. When you are in an empathic state, you produce oxytocin, a near-magical neurotransmitter that promotes feelings of affection, social bonding and well-being – keys to successful negotiation and conflict resolution.

Practice gratitude

Somewhere, at some point, whether through their words or deeds, someone has been good to you. When you feel irritated or impatient, shift your focus by remembering such people and thanking them. Depending on the situation, it may be simply about feeling grateful for what they did, or you may even reach out to them. Showing gratitude will help you build new relationships or boost current ones. It can

go a long way towards reducing anger and aggression in your life in general.

Use humour

When a situation is making you impatient, try to see whether there is a funny side to it. For example, you could reframe the situation and make some jokes with the people around you. I remember waiting a long time to check in for a flight. Once I reached the counter, I asked the staff to send one of my bags to London and the other one to Vienna. Her response was, "But we can't do that." I replied, "But you did it last week!" We both chuckled and parted in a better mood. Humour can defuse a situation that could otherwise spiral down. It allows you to step back and put things in perspective.

Be realistic

You may have found yourself in situations where you were really stuck. Indeed, life isn't always fair. In such case, remind yourself of the famous Serenity Prayer: "God, grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." Accepting situations beyond your control may be one of the most difficult tests of your patience, but it is a key life skill.

Practice mindfulness

Whenever you bring awareness to what you're experiencing via your senses, thoughts or emotions, you're being mindful. Mindfulness refers to your ability to be aware of where you are, what you're doing and how you feel. It helps you to be not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around you. By practicing mindfulness, you're creating space for yourself, which can be of great help in dealing with feeling impatient.

Ask others for help

If you still can't manage your impatience, you can always ask others for their help. If your friends and family members aren't up to the task, it may be time to ask a coach or psychotherapist for assistance. Such a professional can help you discover your trigger points and guide you into the proper ways of channelling them.

Often, practicing patience seems to be the art of concealing your impatience. But practicing this art will not only make your life more pleasant, it might also help pave the way for a more satisfying and successful life in the future.

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and the Raoul de

Visit **INSEAD Knowledge**
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>

Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus. He is the Programme Director of ***The Challenge of Leadership***, one of INSEAD's top Executive Education programmes.

Professor Kets de Vries's most recent books are: ***Down the Rabbit Hole of Leadership: Leadership Pathology of Everyday Life; You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Stranger: Executive Coaching Challenges; Telling Fairy Tales in the Boardroom: How to Make Sure Your Organisation Lives Happily Ever After; and Riding the Leadership Rollercoaster: An Observer's Guide.***

Don't miss our latest content. Download the free ***INSEAD Knowledge app*** today.

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on ***Twitter*** and ***Facebook***.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/blog/insead-blog/how-leaders-can-cultivate-patience-in-an-impatient-world-14566>

Download the Knowledge app for free



Visit **INSEAD Knowledge**
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>