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Leading with a Growth Mindset

An interview with Stanford psychologist and author Carol Dweck

Why do some people live up to their potential and others do not? It comes down to mindset, says Carol Dweck.

Dweck is a psychologist, now teaching at Stanford University, who was initially interested in how people cope with failure. Her work with both children and adults reveals that people operate from either "fixed" or "growth" mindsets - and that those with growth mindsets are more successful and resilient.

In her 2006 book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Dweck shares the implications of more than three decades of research. Her research and practical suggestions have gained wide recognition and been applied across fields — education, business, sports, parenting and personal relationships. She recently spoke with CCL.

CCL: What do you mean by "fixed" and "growth" mindsets — and what are the implications of each?

Carol: In a fixed mindset, people believe that their basic qualities are fixed traits. They believe that people have a certain amount of intelligence or ability — and that is that. You either have ability or talent or you don't. This fixed mindset pushes people to repeatedly prove that they have talent. It makes them fearful of challenge and leads them to shy away from activities that they see as difficult because they might not look talented in those activities. For this reason, setbacks can be debilitating.

But in a growth mindset, people believe that their basic qualities can be cultivated and developed through effort, dedication and mentoring. Learning and effort and passion are valued, not just brilliance, so people with this mindset are willing to jump into a challenge because that's how we learn and grow. They aren't held back by fear of mistakes, because they aren't worried about looking smart or always being right. In fact, they are often energized by setbacks and, as a result, are far more resilient than people with fixed mindsets.

CCL: You have found that both children and adults can change from a fixed mindset to be growth-oriented. But at a certain age, many of us feel that we know who we are, our strengths and weaknesses, interests, identity and so on. How do you help adults buy into this idea that they can change their mindset?

Carol: Many adults do feel fixed, so how do we introduce adults to the idea of changing to a growth mindset? Well, I don't tell them, "Your approach to your life (or to your career, or to your employees) has been wrong for the last 20 (or 30 or 40) years!" I actually start with the neuroscience. I tell people how we used to have a certain view of the brain: it developed rapidly in childhood but became static at a certain age. Neuroscience is

This year for our Premium subscribers of *Leading Effectively*, we launched a new service of interviews with a variety of thought leaders who'll offer different perspectives on topics related to leadership. Featured in the July 2011 issue was Carol Dweck Dattner, author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*.



now showing that isn't true. The brain retains an enormous capacity to learn and grow throughout life. The brain forms new connections as you learn, and things that were once difficult can become easy.

The science shows us how a growth mindset is possible. From that point, I encourage people to look into their own lives for evidence of a growth mindset and how the brain allows us to continue to learn.

For example, you might ask people (as Joshua Aronson and Peter Heslin did in their research), "Think of examples in your own life of something you were not good at initially, and now you are really good at." This could be during their school years, early in their career, taking on a new job, even a sport or hobby. You could then say, "Think of people that you know that you thought never could do something — but they did it: maybe an employee who stepped up, a colleague who went back to school to earn a degree, a friend who changed careers. How are these things possible? What does this tell you about how we can learn and grow throughout our lives?"

CCL: You also link a growth mindset to greater success. Why?

Carol: It's not that people with a fixed mindset start out as less talented than others. However, when they buy into the fixed mindset of either they're talented or not, smart or not, capable or not, they may easily lose their confidence when they hit setbacks, since talented people, they think, are not supposed to have setbacks. They are also less willing to put in the effort it takes to learn (talented people, they think, should not need effort), admit mistakes, or be open to trying new things. But what if you need to learn something new for your job? Or you're in a job where setbacks are inevitable and important to learn from? Or you're taking on a new role? The fixed mindset can hold you back.

A manager with a fixed mindset can also hold back his or her employees. The fixed-mindset manager believes that employees are either talented or they're not. Those who are considered untalented, Peter Heslin's research shows, will not be noticed even if they improve. And those who have talent may not be mentored properly, since their talent may be expected to flourish on its own.

CCL: Tell us more about the impact of fixed and growth mindsets in organizations.

Carol: An organizational culture can propagate a mindset, too. People are exquisitely attuned to what a culture values, to what will bring respect and success in that culture. If an organization only values the genius or the superstar, people pick up on that. If you value learning, taking risks, being team players, that's what people will do. And, research by Mary Murphy shows, not only do they respond to the culture — they do not even consider that they are conforming. They genuinely begin to feel, "This is what I value."

Enron is an example of the fixed mindset creating a culture of fear. Jeffrey Skilling would say to dissenters, "You just don't get it." People kept quiet and played the game, in order to be seen as smart and talented.

CCL: What should managers, team leaders and HR/talent management professionals do to promote a growth mindset?

Carol: The question is: What message are you sending with your talent management?

Is your organizational mindset that you have a fixed amount of talent and have to deploy it wisely? Or is the organization looking for passion, creation and dedication? Are you able to say to employees, "You have permission to experiment and make mistakes as long as you are learning and growing and feeding that learning back into the company"?

Who is your "talent" pool? Who are you looking at? What do you look for in your "high-potential talent"? Are you tapping the people who are improving, learning, digging into their work, seeking information, showing

initiative? Or are you tapping the people who focus on their expertise or who sit there protecting their reputation as smart, talented and successful?

The message of a growth mindset has to come from someone with clout. Managers and executives need to announce their values to the organization. You need to show your own growth mindset and be explicit. Build it into your reviews, evaluations, feedback, raises, promotions. You need to be able to say, "A lot of people have raw talent. We don't care — that's just a starting point; it's what you do with your talent that we care about."

CCL: Do you have any advice for people who have been identified as high-potential talent?

Carol: The "high-potential" people are typically given the resources, the mentoring, the assignments, the experiences, the development investment. Many succeed because they have the opportunities and then apply themselves - not automatically because of raw talent or intelligence or test scores. They succeed when they have passion and ingenuity to learn from these opportunities.

But there is a danger. High-potentials in organizations are accustomed to being the best and getting the highest accolades. Many want to keep getting these accolades above all else. But to fulfill their potential in this new, challenging and ever-changing world, they need to shift their focus - from being the lone superstar to being willing to learn and change, and doing that as a member of a team. To be successful leaders, they also need to convey the growth mindset to the people they are in charge of, giving them permission to experiment and make mistakes, too.

A few weeks ago a professional sports coach came to see me, and he asked, "How do you deal with people who have always been superstars?" He was shocked at how fragile they were and so in need of constant accolades. He asked, "How do I get them into a learning mode?"

I said, "Tell the whole team, 'I can puff you up and give you accolades or I can take your abilities as far as they go. How many want the constant puffing up and how many of you want to be the best you can be?' Let them make the choice."

CCL: What steps can our readers take to build or strengthen a growth mindset? What can they do this week to get started?

Carol: First, I'd say pick an area that is important for your job or career or growth, but an area in which you may have thought, "I'm just not good at it." Then take a major step and start pursuing that.

CCL: Not baby steps or a small goal in that direction?

Carol: No, no. Do not start with the small stuff. Make a commitment. What is something important in your life, in your career, as a leader? What do you need to work on to improve your work or your life? Do something outrageous, big. Face it head-on.

There is a movement afoot to accept our weaknesses and build only on our strengths. But why assume strengths and weaknesses are permanent? Especially if the skills are key to your job? If you are motivated to learn, why assume you can't? Just because you couldn't or didn't do something 10 years ago, why should you assume you can't learn it today? You may be very pleasantly surprised.