

The Leadership Mindset: Cultivating a Growth Mindset for Success

A leader's mindset will greatly affect how they face a crisis, manage change and create strategy for the future. A person's mindset influences how they view themselves and the world around them and can create self-imposed limitations. Mindset can mean the difference between success and failure. What one leader sees as a threat, another may see as an opportunity for learning. Everyone views the world through the filter of their own minds, and it is important to be aware of how mindset impacts behavior, choices, and outcomes. Likewise, it is important to know that mindsets can change and be cultivated and developed with intention and practice.

Growth Mindset vs. Fixed Mindset

In her book, **Mindset: The New Psychology of Success**, psychologist Carol Dweck divides mindset into two general categories— fixed mindset and growth mindset. She explains that people with a fixed mindset believe that qualities like intelligence and talent are fixed traits that cannot be improved through effort. In contrast, individuals with a growth mindset believe that true potential is unlimited, and with effort and determination, individuals can enhance their skills and abilities. In uncertain times, cultivating a growth mindset can be beneficial to leaders and their teams. A growth mindset can improve resilience



and create a positive framework for facing difficult challenges. The belief that people can learn, grow, and change is vital for organizations facing difficult economic, social and operational challenges. A growth mindset will help leaders pivot as needed, recognizing failures and unforeseen problems as opportunities to gain insight and improve future processes, policies, and outcomes.

However, it should not be assumed that any individual has either a growth or fixed mindset. In reality, most people experience mindset on a continuum or a mix of both mindsets that show up in different circumstances. For example, someone may believe they are “not good at math,” and having that fixed mindset will cause them to feel that no amount of practice or instruction can improve their math skills. That same person may believe they can learn a new

skill like knitting if they take a class or watch a video online, demonstrating a growth mindset when taking up a new hobby. Ironically, believing that a person can always view their circumstances with a growth mindset is a great example of having a fixed mindset. Great leaders understand that mindsets are dynamic and can be balanced or adjusted according to the situation at hand.

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Human thinking is far more complex than two general categories can encompass. There are multiple ways to further categorize mindsets that can help or hinder a leader's success. These can be viewed as subcategories of either growth or fixed mindsets.



Learning vs. Performance Mindset

Leaders with a learning mindset enjoy learning new things and approach challenges as an opportunity to improve their skills and increase competence. Those with a performance mindset are more focused on being judged favorably or simply avoiding a negative judgment regarding their own competence. Leaders who approach problems with a learning mindset are more likely to seek feedback and engage in learning strategies while remaining adaptable and persistent.

Inclusive vs. Exclusive Mindset

Having an inclusive mindset is vital for leaders today. Inclusive leaders regularly invite input from people who think, look or act differently from themselves, and believe that these differences can be leveraged as an advantage. In contrast, a leader with a more exclusive mindset may be guarded and avoid interacting with anyone who is different, resulting in reduced creativity and innovation on their teams. Exclusive mindset leaders may be overly focused on hierarchies and be seen as unapproachable by lower-level employees.

Enterprise vs. Siloed Mindset

An enterprise mindset is the ability to link individual and team performance to organizational results. Leaders with an enterprise mindset understand that no part of an organization operates in a silo and that every team member contributes to the group's success. People with a siloed mindset tend to think of their role as separate from the overall organization, prioritizing personal goals over organizational success. By linking team performance to

organizational outcomes, enterprise leaders clarify goals and connect every job to a larger purpose.

Shifting Mindsets

It is clear that a leader's mindset directly influences the success of their teams and organizations. When facing difficult challenges, leaders must consciously consider how their mindset is affecting their decision-making and problem-solving. Leaders must recognize when they are in a mindset that may impede progress towards a goal. This requires leaders to develop self-awareness to understand their own mindset at any given time.

Building Self-Awareness

Author and professor at the University of Illinois at Springfield, Cam Caldwell, Ph.D. says, "Self-awareness is an effort. It's a conscious effort to invest in understanding who we are, who others are, our universal rules that [we] apply in life, and our commitment to the future." Leaders that develop self-awareness understand their values and goals and are attuned to the purpose and mission of their work. Developing self-awareness is the first in shifting from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset.

There are simple practices any leader can use to improve their self-awareness.

- **Self-Observation.** Anyone can benefit from taking time to cultivate awareness of how their thoughts, emotions, and behavior affect people and situations throughout the day. Simple practices like journaling can help individuals reflect on how they have spent time each day and how closely it has aligned with their intention and goals.



- **Seek Feedback.** Leaders can conduct 360 evaluations to better understand how others perceive them and to measure the effectiveness of their leadership approach. Seeking input from peers and mentors can also shed light on patterns of behavior and areas for improvement.
- **Meditation.** Meditation is a powerful tool to tune into thoughts and feelings. Beginning a consistent meditation practice with as little as 10 minutes a day will improve self-awareness, boost the immune system, reduce stress, and increase mental focus.

Retraining the Mind

Leaders who are stuck in an unhelpful mindset can shift towards a positive or growth mindset to accomplish more by beginning to retrain the brain to view challenges as opportunities.

- **Cultivate gratitude.** [Robert A. Emmons, Ph.D., a leading gratitude researcher](#), has conducted multiple studies on the link between gratitude and well-being. Grateful people are more empathetic, more resilient in times of stress, and have higher self-esteem. The simple act of listing three things you are thankful for each day can begin shifting focus from problems to opportunities.
- **Switch roles for a new perspective.** One way to quickly gain a new perspective is to experience things from someone else's point of view. Leaders could take on the duties of another team member for a day to gain insight into the challenges they face. Viewing an organization's operations from a new angle can shift perceptions about current challenges and open a leader's mind to new solutions.
- **Embrace personal development.** To embrace a growth mindset, leaders should seek out learning opportunities for themselves and their teams. Enrolling in a [leadership development program](#) or attending a [leadership skill workshop](#) can help leaders and teams develop new skills and gain new perspectives. In addition, learning new skills reinforces a growth mindset, reminding individuals that they can always improve and grow personally and professionally.
- **Pursue new interests.** Trying new things can be intimidating, but learning to fail and try again is a great way to build resilience. Leaders that can reach outside of their comfort zone and approach new experiences with curiosity are more likely to approach challenges with a growth mindset.
- **Perform Post-Mortems.** Conducting a post mortem when projects are completed is a great tool for analyzing where operations succeeded and where they failed. Leaders who focus on this exercise as a learning opportunity to improve future performance demonstrate grit and encourage it in their teams.
- **Embrace Optimism.** Leaders with grit embrace optimism but do not live in denial that bad things happen. Acknowledging the bad with the good is important, but maintaining optimism that things can always improve is the key to resilience in tough times.

Leaders everywhere are facing complex problems and unforeseen challenges. Approaching these issues with a growth mindset will allow for innovation and foster resilience in organizations and teams. While mindset fluctuates over time and circumstances, consciously choosing to adopt a growth mindset greatly improves a leader's ability to overcome obstacles while inspiring their teams to do the same.

Developing "Grit"

Author of [GRIT, The Power of Passion and Perseverance](#), Angela Lee Duckworth, Ph.D., defines "grit" as the tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward very long-term goals. Her research has shown that grit is the hallmark of high achievers, and importantly is something that can be developed and grown through attention and practice.

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