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Growth Mindset Leadership for a Collaborative, Learning Organization

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People in a growth mindset believe that human qualities and abilities can change. By contrast, those in a fixed mindset think that skills are largely set in stone, determined by natural abilities. In reality, no one falls completely into one camp or the other. Many people tend to be in a growth mindset with respect to some skills and abilities (e.g., reading) and in a fixed mindset with respect to others (e.g., singing). From the perspective of an organization, having leaders who follow a growth mindset is critical to improvement and innovation. To be effective, leaders must believe that they themselves, and those who work with and for them, can hone their skills and abilities. More importantly, they must create a culture that allows for such growth and development.



Many admired, well-known people have had a growth mindset. Einstein, for example, clearly saw intelligence as malleable. As he once said, "It's not that I'm so smart, it's that I stay with the problem longer." Author J.K. Rowling wrote, "You have to resign yourself to wasting lots of trees before you can write something worthwhile." World-renowned investor Warren Buffett has a similar take on investing prowess. He once wrote that he sits in his office reading all day, likening the build-up of knowledge to compound interest. Similarly, Michael Jordan, arguably the best basketball player ever to play the game, openly discusses how getting cut from his high school basketball team served as a motivator for him to work harder than anyone else to develop his skills.

Characteristics of a Fixed versus Growth Mindset

Led by Carol Dweck, Ph.D., many researchers have now studied mindset. A set of those studies investigated whether the human brain works differently in those with a fixed versus growth mindset. They measured people's mindset by asking whether they believed it is possible to become smarter, as opposed to people having a fixed level of intelligence, and then they used a brain scan machine to look into their brain as they solved problems. They found that those with a growth mindset pay more attention to their mistakes and consequently achieve superior accuracy over time.

Additional studies have found other major differences. Those in a fixed mindset tend to focus on trying to "look smart" and hence often gravitate toward activities they already know how to do. They generally avoid challenges, view effort as a negative, and often give up, or otherwise feel helpless in response to setbacks. They often respond defensively to criticism, see others' success as a threat, feel compelled to punish and retaliate in response to wrongdoing, and become more depressed in response to life's challenges.

"We can't just banish the fixed mindset. We all experience it at times. We must take the journey to develop a growth mindset. As leaders, we need to build a culture where people come to work in a growth mindset."

— Eduardo Briceño

By contrast, those in a growth mindset have an overall goal of learning and improving. They tend to seek challenges, view effort positively, are resilient in the face of setbacks, and see criticism as an opportunity to learn and others' success as a positive lesson and inspiration. They attribute wrongdoing to people's situation and motivations and respond with dialogue and openness to compromise. They show greater resilience when confronted with life's challenges.

Other research supports the idea that the nation's "love affair" with natural abilities is misplaced. Retrospective studies of the childhoods of elite performers find virtually no early predictors of their later success. The only exception is for sports such as basketball and gymnastics, where height and body weight play a role. No cognitive domains, however, predicted success. What did matter, however, was the amount and quality of practice. (The amount of sleep also proves to be important.) Trends in average IQ over time also support the growth mindset view on intelligence. Average scores have increased by 30 points in the past 100 years. Evolution can't explain the change, since there are too few generations in 100 years, so only development can explain the change—in other words, the world has become somewhat better at making people smarter after birth.

Building a Growth Mindset

As noted, no one falls completely into one camp or the other. People are often in a growth mindset about certain things and a fixed mindset about others. For example, many people believe that one can learn leadership skills but not to think creatively. In addition, such beliefs can change over time and in some cases may be different when thinking about one's self versus others. Mindsets tend to be context-specific and hence may change when situations change, such as taking on a new job or role. That said, parents undoubtedly play important roles in shaping the mindsets of their children. Parents may inadvertently foster a fixed mindset when praising their children by using phrases such as "you are so smart" (which emphasizes natural ability) rather than asking questions for children to reflect on their process (which emphasizes the importance of strategies and mental effort). Later in life, teachers and bosses can have a similar impact as well.

Effective leaders build a culture where people come to work in a growth mindset. Doing so yields many benefits, as outlined below:

- ✓ Faster growth, better performance, and greater resilience
- ✓ More positive and collaborative relationships
- ✓ Greater diversity, equity, and inclusion
- ✓ Greater creativity and innovation
- ✓ More ethical behavior (e.g., in a fixed mindset, people may feel the need to lie about performance or take shortcuts)
- ✓ Higher levels of trust, ownership over work, and commitment



Creating this type of culture allows employees to spend ample time in the "learning zone" rather than the "performance zone." There's a good reason that Michael Jordan performs so well during games and that Cirque du Soleil performers seem to be nearly flawless during their shows. They spend an incredible amount of time practicing what they don't know in an environment where it is okay and safe to make mistakes. Cirque du Soleil performers practice daring, dangerous feats over and over until they get it right. They keep making and learning from their mistakes until they get it right, because the consequences of failure are virtually non-existent. Unlike during performances, they practice with nets underneath them and other safety systems that allow them to take on challenges and learn from their mistakes. World-class performers routinely alternate between the learning and performance zones but spend most of their time focused on practice and getting better. By contrast, employees of most organizations spend almost all their time in the performance zone, a situation that leads to stagnation.

Exhibit 1: Learning and Performance Zones



	Learning Zone	Performance Zone
<p>Goal Activities designed for We focus on what Mistakes are to be Common source of mistakes Desired response to mistakes Optimal mindset</p>	<p>Improve Improvement We don't know Expected Challenge Learning Growth mindset</p>	<p>Perform Performance We have mastered Avoided Distraction or unprepared Learning Growth mindset</p>

"To improve, we must be deliberate about improvement. It's not just about hard work. You have to deliberately spend time trying to get better in the learning zone."

—Eduardo Briceño

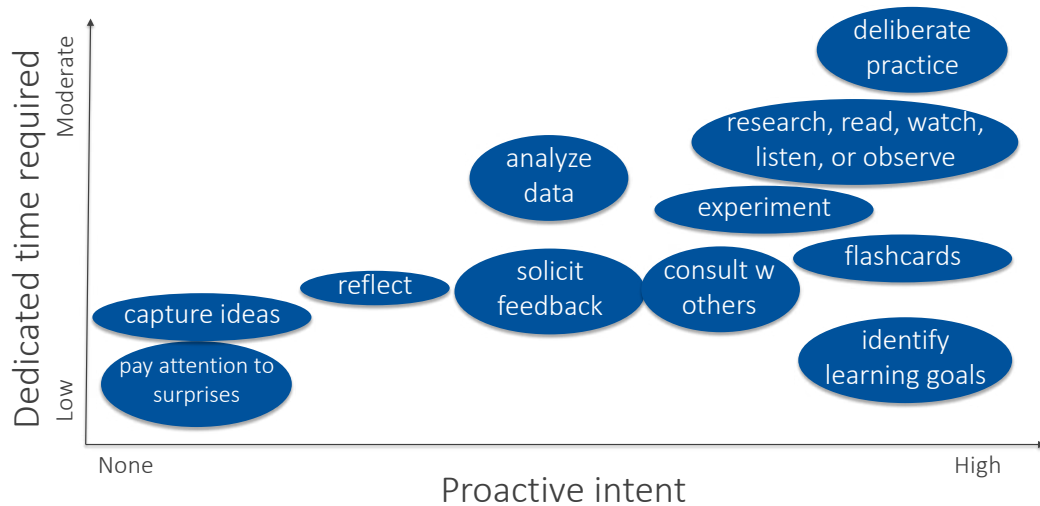
To create a growth mindset culture, leaders can educate themselves about mindsets and why they matter, understand their own mindset and its effect on others, and learn how top performers develop through endless practice and hard work. Once they "get it" in terms of the need for a growth mindset, leaders must then create the environment and structures that allow everyone around them to adopt one, as outlined below.

Step 1: Create a Shared Vision

Leaders can create a shared vision of the culture they want to build, making it clear how people can and should interact with one another. They should encourage teams to regularly engage in the learning zone, such as through the following activities:

- ✓ Set learning and improvement goals.
- ✓ Research best practices outside the system.
- ✓ Try something new or experiment.
- ✓ Consult with colleagues or domain experts.
- ✓ Observe and emulate advanced performers.
- ✓ Assess and reflect.
- ✓ Examine and discuss mistakes or surprises, with the goal of learning from them.
- ✓ Solicit, give, and receive open and honest feedback.
- ✓ Consider the possibility of being wrong.
- ✓ Speak with others about how to learn and improve.

Exhibit 2: Sample Learning Zone Activities



Step 2: Model Desired Behaviors

Often leaders speak about the importance of continuous improvement, but they themselves behave like knowers rather than learners. To cultivate a growth mindset culture, leaders must model the behaviors and actions they want to see in others, so that when others emulate them, they behave in the desired ways. Role modeling behaviors helps create psychological safety, making intelligent mistakes and failure safe throughout the organization. People will not be willing to take on risks and potentially make mistakes if they fear that there will be negative consequences. They need psychological safety, islands of space and time where they can openly talk to and learn from each other without fear.

"Others learn through your actions as leaders whether abilities are malleable and whether it is safe to grow, learn, and improve."

—Eduardo Briceño

More specifically, leaders can model learning by visibly doing the following:

- ✓ Identify skills that they personally want to improve and share them with the rest of the organization.
- ✓ Take on worthwhile challenges and risks as learning opportunities.
- ✓ Seek resources that could be useful for personal growth.
- ✓ Try something new (i.e., experiment).
- ✓ Ask questions when they do not know the answers.
- ✓ Answer questions with phrases such as "I don't know, what do you think?" or "let's look into that."
- ✓ Solicit and process feedback from peers, managers, and direct reports.

- ✓ Recognize, reflect on, and discuss mistakes, and share lessons learned with others.
- ✓ Make it safe to seek challenges; acknowledge mistakes and uncertainty; and solicit, give, and receive feedback.
- ✓ Listen and be open to all ideas, encouraging open discussion and feedback from staff.

Step 3: Set Up Systems and Routines

In addition to modeling ongoing learning, leaders can put in place systems, routines, and habits to encourage experimentation and innovation. Sample systems include the following:

- ✓ Routines to regularly identify what to improve and how
- ✓ Performance management systems that include constructive feedback, assessment of growth, and learning
- ✓ Broadly available professional development opportunities
- ✓ Systems for experimentation and data analysis
- ✓ Protocols for frequent and constructive feedback
- ✓ Agenda and calendar practices that make learning, reflecting, and sharing a habit
- ✓ Structures for interdisciplinary communication and collaboration
- ✓ Space and programs for risk-taking and innovation