

Mindset

The New Psychology of Success

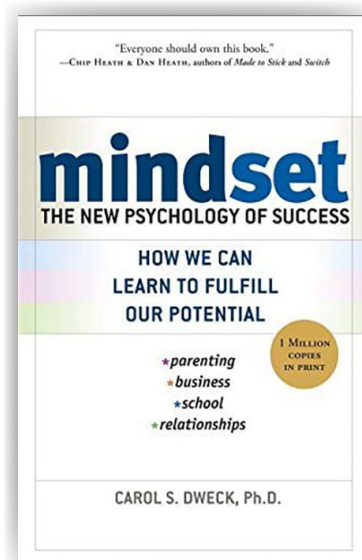
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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The growth mindset and the fixed mindset affect every aspect of a person's life:

- *Sports:* Fixed mindset individuals believe a person must be born talented to succeed in a sport. They undervalue practice and steady improvement, while growth mindset individuals consider effort to be the key to success.
- *Business:* While growth mindset business leaders strive to constantly learn and develop the talents of all employees, fixed mindset leaders exalt themselves and what they consider to be their "innate" business sense, often to the detriment of their companies.
- *Relationships:* Relationships governed by a fixed mindset do not value personal growth or effort geared toward bringing harmony and understanding.
- *Teaching:* Fixed mindset coaches, parents, and teachers send messages to the children in their care that it is not their effort but their accomplishments (a result of their innate talent) that bring success. By contrast, growth mindset adults let young people know that they value progressive improvement with consistent effort.

OVERVIEW

Most people believe personality traits are fixed characteristics that are present at birth and persist throughout an individual's lifetime. Recent research, however, indicates these "fixed" traits are simply the symptoms of a person's belief system. These beliefs can be so strong, in fact, that they positively or negatively influence every aspect of an individual's life: sports, business, relationships, parenting, teaching, and coaching.

According to Carol S. Dweck, one of the world's leading researchers in the field of motivation, there are two main belief systems, or *mindsets*, that people can possess. These mindsets strongly influence the way

individuals respond to success and failure, and in **Mindset**, Dweck uses research, examples of well-known business and sports leaders, and specific scenarios to demonstrate how changing one's mindset can profoundly affect the outcome of almost every situation. Dweck also explains how understanding the basics of mindsets can help in accepting and understanding relationships and the people who comprise them.

THE TWO MINDSETS

Since the early 1900s, scientists have debated whether intelligence and personality are fixed traits or whether they are abilities that can be progressively developed. Most researchers today agree that a person's mental and personal characteristics are the product of both genetic makeup as well as environmental influences. Dweck takes this view one step further: she theorizes that there are two main mindsets that affect every aspect of a person's life, accomplishments, and relationships. These two mindsets are the *fixed mindset* and the *growth mindset*.

An individual with a fixed mindset considers personality and mental qualities to be fixed and intractable; they have been present since birth. People with a fixed mindset are driven by the need to prove themselves in every facet of their lives, and they tend to respond to setbacks and challenges as if they are personal attacks on themselves.

Individuals with a growth mindset see all personal qualities as fluid; they can be changed with effort, experience, and application. Growth mindset people see challenges and difficulties as an opportunity to grow and change, not as a reflection of their worth as a person. The difference between people with fixed mindsets and people with growth mindsets is demonstrated in a number of ways:

- *Risk-taking*: Of the two mindsets, individuals with the growth mindset are better able to take risks, and they often seek out high-risk situations. Those with fixed mindsets typically fear risks and will go out of their way to avoid them, even when it hinders their personal development.
- *Ability to judge strengths and weaknesses*: Individuals with the growth mindset are generally accurate at judging their strengths and weaknesses and see failures as opportunities for future successes. In contrast, people with the fixed mindset are much worse at estimating their personal abilities, and they regularly see failures as negative reflections on themselves, not as windows for growth.
- *Attitude toward learning*: Individuals with the growth mindset view learning as an opportunity for growth and future success. If they believe they will improve from the experience, they are not afraid to put themselves into situations in which they might fail. Fixed mindset individuals avoid learning experiences in which they may have to struggle; they prefer to take part in situations in which they feel competent and smart.
- *Relationships*: Growth mindset people gravitate toward mates and partners who foster their future development as a person. Fixed mindset people tend to choose mates who reinforce their feelings about themselves and make them feel perfect and infallible.
- *Short-term versus long-term strategies*: Fixed mindset people, especially in a business setting, tend to focus on short-term strategies at the expense of future growth. Leaders and businesspeople with the growth mindset invest their energy into long-term strategies, aiming for later, stronger improvement.
- *Feelings about intelligence*: A fixed mindset person feels smart when they perform flawlessly without any effort or struggle to do so. A growth mindset person, however, gauges their intelligence by how hard they worked in order to achieve success.

- *Feelings about tests:* When it comes to tests, fixed mindset people tend to view their performance as a measure of their overall intelligence as a person, while growth mindset people see their performance as simply a milestone on their way to future growth. Growth mindset individuals realize that it may take years of work for them to realize their full potential.
- *Feelings of specialness and entitlement:* Fixed mindset people often fall into the trap of assuming that they must be superior to other people in their talents and successes in order to feel good about themselves. If they are not superior, they feel valueless and unsuccessful.
- *Attitude toward failure:* People with the growth mindset look at failure as an opportunity to grow. They do not allow failures to define them. Fixed mindset individuals, on the other hand, have difficulty progressing past failures; to them, failure at a task or challenge means that they themselves are a failure. People with the fixed mindset also have a tendency to interpret other people's successes as failures on their own behalf. And to deal with their feelings of personal failure, fixed mindset people often blame others for their mistakes.
- *Depression:* While both fixed and growth mindset individuals can suffer from depression during difficult times, growth mindset people take more action to better their lives and overcome their problems when they are depressed. Fixed mindset people tend to try less and less.
- *Thoughts about effort:* For fixed mindset people, effort is something that is needed only for people who do not have an innate ability. In fact, individuals with this mindset often see effort as demeaning. They believe that truly great geniuses do not need to expend effort to achieve. They also fear effort because, for them, trying hard but still failing is terrifying. A person with the growth mindset believes that effort is essential to any successful endeavor. They see the true failure as a person who wants to achieve but is too afraid to try.
- *Attitude toward artistic ability:* Growth mindset individuals are more likely to believe that artistic talent is a skill that can be learned. Fixed mindset individuals believe that talent for art is an inborn gift.
- *Reaction to negative labels and stereotypes:* Negative labels – including unflattering or derogatory gender and race labels – also affect a person's performance, but much more so if they already have a fixed mindset. When confronted with negative stereotypes, people with the growth mindset are much more likely to see the label as merely an outsider's incorrect view, and they will put forth more effort in proving them wrong. Negative labels can be especially damaging to fixed mindset women in the fields of math and science.

It is possible for people to have different mindsets governing different areas of their lives. For instance, they may view their athletic abilities through a fixed mindset, but their artistic abilities through the growth mindset. Additionally, people may display some parts of one mindset but not others.

These mindsets have clear consequences in the sports and business world, as well as in relationships. Additionally, the mindsets greatly affect the usefulness of certain parenting, teaching, and coaching techniques.

HOW THE MINDSETS AFFECT SPORTS

In the world of sports, the fixed mindset – the belief that natural talent is the key to success – is dominant. It is common for coaches, scouts, fans, and athletes to believe that to be the best, you must be “a natural.” However, modern sports history shows this is not true. Muhammad Ali, Michael Jordan, Babe Ruth, Wilma Rudolph, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, and Maury Wills all demonstrate that superior athletic achievement is not due to natural talent alone – it is also heavily linked to effort and practice. In fact, athletes for whom skill

comes easily with little work often never learn to connect performance with hard work. In addition, they may find it much more difficult to see themselves as a member of a team of other athletes or with assisting coaches and staff. They often prefer to think of themselves as the “star.”

According to the author, however, the best athletes display some common qualities in competition: when they experience setbacks or challenges and become vulnerable, they refuse to blame others or outside circumstances for their problems. Instead, they find enough resolve within themselves to come back and triumph. It is this mental toughness that allows these athletes to succeed when other, possibly more talented athletes, cannot.

In studies conducted by sports researcher Stuart Biddle and his colleagues, athletes with the growth mindset were found to be more likely to display the mental toughness needed to succeed than athletes with the fixed mindset. The growth mindset athletes shared three common attitudes toward success, failure, and effort. They:

1. *Believe true success is found in learning and improving.* In contrast, athletes with the fixed mindset see success as an establishment of their superiority in their sport. They cannot be content with personal growth over winning.
2. *See setbacks as powerful motivators.* With the growth mindset, athletes are able to see even the most embarrassing failures as learning experiences. Fixed mindset athletes, however, see failures as shameful and labeling.
3. *Are active in their progressive improvement.* These athletes strive to continually hone their skills and stay on top of their game. Since fixed mindset athletes see their successes more as a manifestation of their natural abilities, they are less likely to take an active role in improving themselves.

HOW THE MINDSETS AFFECT BUSINESS

Much like the sports world, the business world also lauds natural talent and functions on the belief that corporations must be based on the “talent mindset” in order to succeed. Unfortunately, this focus on talent pushes companies into the fixed mindset, and according to Dweck, this makes them vulnerable to Enron-like meltdowns. In contrast, businesses characterized by the growth mindset elevate effort and improvement over innate talent and therefore deal with setbacks better.

A number of researchers have found that a company’s overall mindset is a direct reflection of their leader or manager’s mindset. Studies in Jim Collins’ book *Good to Great* reveal that the leaders of businesses that have thrived for over 15 years have all focused on improvement rather than ego and superiority.

Fixed mindset leaders are also much more likely than growth mindset leaders to lead groups that fall prey to *groupthink* – the tendency for people in a group to hide concerns or disagreements and simply approve the status quo and any of the leader’s ideas, just to avoid conflict. Groupthink can occur whenever an organization puts too much faith in the genius of the leader or the company’s past successes, or when the leader’s fixed mindset leads the group to punish those who disagree in any way. For whatever reason it occurs, however, groupthink hinders the open, honest discussions that a growth mindset fosters.

EXAMPLES OF FIXED MINDSET LEADERS

The fixed mindset leadership model (personal superiority, with the company’s employees as mere “help-

ers" to the main "genius") and its failings are demonstrated by the careers of Lee Iacocca of Chrysler, Albert Dunlap of Scott Paper and Sunbeam, Jerry Levin and Steve Case of AOL Time Warner, and Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling of Enron.

- *Lee Iacocca:* After basking in the favor of the Ford company's head, Henry Ford II, Iacocca was enraged when he was forced out of the company. He rehabilitated Chrysler largely to prove himself to Henry Ford. Though he was successful, he became obsessed with his public image and worried that lower employees might receive more praise than him. As a result, Chrysler suffered.
- *Albert Dunlap:* Albert Dunlap focused exclusively on business profits as a means to improve his self-image. He did not invest in long-term strategies, instead putting his energies into short-term strategies that would increase stock prices. When Dunlap stayed to head Sunbeam, his short-term outlook did not work: the company collapsed and Dunlap was forced out.
- *Jerry Levin and Steve Case:* AOL's Steve Case and Time Warner's Jerry Levin both led their companies with the fixed mindset. The two were convinced of their superiority and remained intolerant to criticism. When their companies merged, their power struggle gave AOL Time Warner the biggest yearly financial loss in American history in 2002.
- *Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling:* Both Lay and Skilling saw themselves as profoundly more intelligent than the rest of their employees, and they acted with a harshness and condescension that matched that belief. The two were so confident in their infallible business sense they began to record Enron profits for business ventures that had not yet generated any revenue.

The actions of these fixed mindset leaders demonstrate they believed themselves inherently superior to their employees. They bolstered that opinion by treating their employees badly. In organizations with such leaders at the head, the employees stop striving for achievement and growth and worry instead about keeping the leader happy. The fixed mindset outlook infects all the workers, yielding a company that cannot thrive.

EXAMPLES OF GROWTH MINDSET LEADERS

By contrast, growth mindset leaders are focused on growth: the growth of the company, the growth of each worker as an individual, and their personal growth as a leader. Three leaders in particular exemplify this style of leadership: Jack Welch, Lou Gerstner, and Anne Mulcahy. All three transformed their companies by replacing entrenched company-wide fixed mindsets with a growth mindset culture.

- *Jack Welch:* As CEO of GE, Welch increased the company's value from \$14 billion to \$490 billion in 20 years. Welch emphasized teamwork and stayed in constant contact with employees right down to the front-line factory workers. Welch learned from early business mistakes to be open to change and constant improvement, to act as a supportive guide – not a judge – to his workers, and to reward kindness and cooperation in managers and supervisors.
- *Lou Gerstner:* When he became the CEO of IBM in 1993, Gerstner fostered a culture of teamwork by taking power away from upper-level management and preventing separate sales divisions from working against one another. Before Gerstner, IBM had become a company deaf to its customers' needs; Gerstner restored quality customer service as the organization's main focus.
- *Anne Mulcahy:* Mulcahy learned every aspect of business at the faltering Xerox when she took over in 2000. Because of her intimate knowledge of the company, its employees, and the employees' concerns, she was able to bring the company back from the edge of ruin.

Companies and businesses can encourage a growth mindset in their supervisors, managers, and employees by publicly praising workers for their struggle, daring, and initiative in the workplace; incorporating growth mindset workshops into corporate training programs; and helping high-level leaders understand that successful negotiation skills are closely linked to a strong growth mindset.

HOW THE MINDSETS AFFECT RELATIONSHIPS

The fixed and growth mindsets affect much more than performance in the business or sports arena; they also affect every aspect of an individual's attitude toward personal relationships.

In any relationship, there are three variables that can differ greatly depending on a person's mindset about them:

1. His or her own personal qualities
2. The other individual's qualities
3. The qualities of the overall relationship

All three – or any one alone or in combination – can be perceived through either the fixed or growth mindset. Which mindset they are viewed through profoundly affects the course of the relationship.

People who view relationships through a strict fixed mindset display a number of characteristics:

- *They believe that a really good relationship should never have problems:* Individuals with a fixed mindset feel that if a relationship requires effort to keep it together, it must not be ideal.
- *They believe their partner should already know what they think, feel, and need:* These individuals discount constant communication, believing that if they were truly suited to one another, their partner would not need to be told what they are thinking or feeling.
- *They believe couples should agree on all things:* Instead of trying to determine what their partner feels, individuals with the fixed mindset assume that they both must share the same views at all times.
- *They believe that problems in a relationship are rooted in deep-seated character flaws in the other individual:* More often than not, they also believe that these flaws are inherent and cannot be changed.
- *They have a tendency to turn their partner into the enemy when things go badly:* Individuals with the fixed mindset feel that to exonerate their partner when the relationship is in trouble means that they are responsible themselves. Because of this tendency, it is easier for them to shift the blame to the other person.
- *When hurt in a relationship, their main focus is revenge:* Fixed mindset individuals don't forgive, forget, or move on easily after a relationship has gone badly. Instead, they actively hope for bad things to happen to the person they feel has wronged them.
- *They tend to compete with their partner:* People with the fixed mindset feel overshadowed and diminished if their partner excels them in any way. They may end up begrudging their achievements or striving to outshine them.

By contrast, people with the growth mindset see relationships as an opportunity for both individuals to encourage the growth and development of the other.

The same concepts that govern intimate relationships govern those between friends: individuals with a fixed mindset will often look to demean their friends in order to boost their own feelings of achievement or superiority.

Fixed mindset people can also be severely hindered by shyness as well as bullying. While both fixed and growth mindset individuals can suffer from shyness, in general only fixed mindset people have trouble seeing social interactions as anything other than risky opportunities in which they might be socially judged. Likewise, people with a fixed mindset who are bullied fantasize about revenge and evening the score between them and their tormentors. Growth mindset people, on the other hand, strive to overcome difficulties with shyness, and when they are bullied, they hope for growth on both their part and that of the people bullying them.

HOW THE MINDSETS AFFECT PARENTING, TEACHING, AND COACHING

Even with the best of intentions, parents, teachers, and coaches can be unaware of the messages they send to the children and young people in their care. According to Dweck, every word and action conveys either a fixed or growth mindset message. Fixed mindset messages lead children to believe their abilities and traits are unchangeable and that their personal worth is determined by those traits. Growth mindset messages emphasize that everyone has an unlimited capacity for development.

These messages are primarily communicated in the way parents, teachers, and coaches give youngsters feedback, in the way they discipline, and in the way they view effort and improvement.

COMMUNICATING SUCCESS FROM FIXED AND GROWTH MINDSETS

When adults praise the successes of children by specifically praising their intelligence, they inadvertently place the child into the fixed mindset. By indicating that success means they are intelligent, adults send the message that failure means they are not intelligent. Once the child starts to believe this, they will avoid challenging learning situations in order to avoid failure. To praise success in a growth mindset manner, adults should strive to focus on praising the effort children and students put into their achievements rather than the eventual outcome.

COMMUNICATING FAILURE FROM FIXED AND GROWTH MINDSETS

When parents, teachers, and coaches do not give constructive criticism to youngsters when they fail, they rob them of the information they need to improve, thereby placing their development into the fixed mindset. Children without useful feedback and criticism may end up blaming others for their mistakes or learn to devalue activities in which they don't naturally excel.

Growth mindset leaders are honest with the children under them. They give them specific points for improvement and let them know that if they want to succeed in the future, they must put in more effort. These leaders do not, however, equate success with self-worth, and they are careful to let young people know that they are not failures at an activity if they simply choose not to put effort into developing that particular skill.

DISCIPLINE

The mindsets also affect how an adult disciplines and encourages children. Growth mindset adults discipline with the goal of helping children think and learn; their main goal is for the child to grow into a happy, fulfilled adult. Individuals with the fixed mindset discipline as a means of judgment and punishment. Their actions communicate that they are only acceptable if they succeed in specific ways.

PROGRESSIVE IMPROVEMENT

While growth mindset parents, teachers, and coaches do not lower their standards or give praise when it is not earned, they are eager to provide an atmosphere of acceptance and encouragement that lets children know that effort and progressive improvement are valued above easy victories. Strongly fixed mindset leaders, on the other hand, such as college basketball coach Bobby Knight, revere the “mistake-free game” above all else. Knight demanded that his teams perform well at all times; when they did not, he made them suffer. By contrast, UCLA’s basketball coach John Wooden focused on full effort and progressive, day-by-day improvement.

The effects of the fixed and growth mindsets permeate every aspect of life. In every instance, the growth mindset yields more personal development than the fixed mindset. Fortunately, it is possible to develop the growth mindset, even in individuals with a firmly fixed mindset.

DEVELOPING THE GROWTH MINDSET

Research conducted in the 1960s by psychiatrist Aaron Beck found that an individual’s beliefs can play a direct role in causing their personal problems. Cognitive therapy, the therapeutic technique that gives people the mental tools to recognize and deal with these often extremely negative beliefs, was developed as a result of Beck’s research.

Dweck expands on Beck’s theories by not only linking negative beliefs to the fixed mindset, but also outlining the path a person must take to transition from a fixed mindset and judgmental framework to a positive, growth mindset.

APPLYING THE GROWTH MINDSET TO EVERYDAY DILEMMAS

An individual can learn to apply the growth mindset to any situation, from a college application rejection, to feeling inadequate when pursuing particular goals, to persistent problems within a relationship.

The first step is to recognize the onset of fixed mindset thoughts. These thoughts can be feelings of hopelessness or helplessness when in challenging situations, or blaming managers, co-workers, or partners when personal or professional problems occur.

Once the fixed mindset thoughts are identified, they then need to be deliberately shifted toward the growth mindset. Feelings of intrinsic failure can be altered into viewing the situation as an opportunity for learning. Instead of reacting to difficulties by closing in and becoming defensive, individuals can reframe the problem as a chance to learn from similar experiences others have had.

Succeeding in shifting the mindset on one occasion is not enough to truly start progressing into the growth mindset, however. The next step is for the individual to make a concrete plan of action that puts the growth mindset outlook on that particular situation into growth-oriented motion. For example, if the individual realizes they are afraid of learning a new skill because they dread failure, the first step in their growth mindset plan could be to schedule a set time and place where they will begin learning the basics of the skill. People who feel debilitated by recent failures can take specific steps to become better prepared for when they next face that particular challenge.

Children exhibiting signs of the fixed mindset – believing that intelligence is equivalent to achieving with little or no effort, or feeling worthless when they fail – can benefit from having their parents guide them toward a focus on effort and growth, supporting them with specific questions and praise for improvements.

Additionally, these strategies for learning and implementing the growth mindset can be applied to controlling harmful personal traits, such as anger or problems with self-control.

MAINTAINING THE GROWTH MINDSET

Dweck recommends that individuals ask themselves four questions daily to keep the growth mindset at the center of their thoughts:

1. What are the opportunities for learning and growth today? For myself? For the people around me?
2. When, where, and how will I embark on my plan?
3. When, where, and how will I act on my new plan?
4. What do I have to do to maintain and continue the growth?

These questions encourage growth mindset development and emphasize the transformative power of embracing constant challenge and growth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D., the Lewis and Virginia Eaton Professor of Psychology at Stanford University and a member of the American Academy of Arts or Sciences, is the author of *Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development*, which was awarded the World Education Fellowship Book of the Year. Dr. Dweck has written a number of articles for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, and *The New Yorker*, and she has appeared on the television shows *20/20* and *Today*. Dr. Dweck has lectured on motivational topics worldwide and has held professorships at both Columbia and Harvard University.

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