

The Growth Mindset

Interview with Carol Dweck, author of Mindset: The New Psychology of Success (2006).

© 2006, Coert Visser

Coert Visser (coert.visser@planet.nl) is a consultant, coach and trainer using the solution-focused change approach. This approach is focused on simply helping individuals, teams and organizations to make progress in the direction of their own choice. Coert wrote many articles and a few books. More information: <http://solutionfocusedchange.blogspot.com/>

Summary - Carol Dweck is a professor of Psychology at Stanford University. She is a leading expert in the field of human motivation and intelligence and through the years she has developed an extensive body of theory and research. This year, she has published a remarkable book called Mindset: The New Psychology of Success. The book is a true gem, not only because of the clarity of the writing and structure but also, and foremost, because of its important and useful message. This message is that the way you view your own intelligence largely determines how it will develop. In this interview I ask Carol Dweck about the book and about what the practical implications of her work are for managers.

Coert: “I’d like to start off with a question about the intriguing title of your new book ‘Mindset: The New Psychology of Success’. Can you explain what the importance of mindset is for success?”

Carol: “I’d be happy to. In my book I identify two mindsets that play important roles in people's success. In one, the fixed mindset, people believe that their talents and abilities are fixed traits. They have a certain amount and that's that; nothing can be done to change it. Many years of research have now shown that when people adopt the fixed mindset, it can limit their success. They become over-concerned with proving their talents and abilities, hiding deficiencies, and

reacting defensively to mistakes or setbacks--because deficiencies and mistakes imply a (permanent) lack of talent or ability. People in this mindset will actually pass up important opportunities to learn and grow if there is a risk of unmasking weaknesses. This is not a recipe for success in business, as ultimately shown by the folks at Enron, who rarely admitted any mistakes. What is the alternative?

In the other mindset, the growth mindset, people believe that their talents and abilities can be developed through passion, education, and persistence. For them, it's not about looking smart or grooming their image. It's about a commitment to learning--taking informed risks and learning from the results, surrounding yourself with people

who will challenge you to grow, looking frankly at your deficiencies and seeking to remedy them. Most great business leaders have had this mindset, because building and maintaining excellent organizations in the face of constant change requires it”.

Coert: “This difference between the effect of a fixed mindset and a growth mindset sounds very logical. But you also back it up by research, don't you? Could you give us maybe one or two examples of how you have researched this?”

Carol: “Yes, the effects of mindsets are backed up by lots of research over more than twenty years. I'll give you a few examples that show how a growth mindset creates greater openness to learning, which, in turn, leads to greater success.

In one recent study, my colleagues and I monitored people's brain waves as they answered difficult questions and waited for feedback. The brain waves told us what kind of feedback they were most interested in. People with a fixed mindset were only interested in whether their answers had been right or wrong. Once they had this feedback, they tuned out. However, people who had a growth mindset stayed tuned in to find out what the right answers actually were. As a result of this greater interest in learning, they did significantly better when they were later tested on the material.

In another study, we saw the real-world consequences. Here, we looked at freshman at the University of Hong Kong, an elite school where everything was conducted in English--but not all freshman were proficient in English. Surely, they would want to take steps to fix this as soon as possible. To find out, we told students that the faculty was thinking of offering a course that would provide needed instruction in English. Would they take it? Among students with poor English skills, those with a growth mindset were enthusiastic, but those with a fixed mindset were not. In a fixed mindset,

people are not willing to expose their deficiency in order to remedy it. Instead, they were willing to put their college career in jeopardy.

Finally, in a recent study we taught struggling students a growth mindset. They were taught that every time they applied themselves and learned something new, their brain formed new connections and, over time, they got smarter. They were also taught how to apply this to their schoolwork. Within a relatively short time, these students showed a clear turnaround in their motivation and their grades. Several other studies have showed the same thing--students taught a growth mindset become more engaged with learning and become higher achievers.”

Coert: “So, research has shown that the fixed mindset limits learning and success while the growth mindset encourages it. That seems like a very important bit of knowledge for managers, HR-managers and employees. Could you tell us about some of the implications for organizations you have been able to identify?”

Carol: “There is a lot of wonderful research emerging on the effects of mindset in the workplace. For example, Peter Heslin, Don Wanderwalle, and Gary Latham have done great work with managers. First, they have found that managers with a growth mindset, in the spirit of learning, are more open to feedback and criticism from their employees.

Next, they have found that managers with a growth mindset believe in other people's growth too. These managers are quick to see change in employees' performance, so if an employee improves they will take notice. But managers with a fixed mindset get stuck in their first impression of the employee and do not even see the change. This means that if an employee learns on the job, their fixed mindset boss may not give them credit for it.

But it goes even deeper. These same

researchers found that when it comes to employee development, managers with a growth mindset give more and better developmental coaching and mentoring to their employees. Managers with a fixed mindset do not believe people can change, so what's the use in coaching employees—they either have it or they don't.

In short, managers with a growth mindset promote and recognize improvement in their workers. Isn't that what we want?

The best news is that a growth mindset can be taught to managers, and when it is, they change. In a short, 90-minute workshop, Heslin and his colleagues fostered a growth mindset in managers who had a fixed mindset. After this workshop, these managers were open to noticing improvement and were more willing and able to coach employees. And the effects lasted over a 6-week follow-up period.

New work from other researchers shows that people in a growth mindset make better negotiators and learn negotiation skills more readily. They are also better at problem-solving on difficult management tasks (both as individuals and as groups).

All these exciting new findings suggest that fostering a growth mindset might well be added to management training programs, since a growth mindset maximizes managers' openness to learning and to promoting skill development in the people they work with.”

Coert: “The fact that the growth mindset can be taught to people sounds like good news. I mean, changing mindsets does not seem like the easiest thing in the world! Can you explain a bit about how this skill can be taught?”

Carol: “Many people are surprised that mindsets can be changed with a relatively short workshop. But it's important to remember that although mindsets are powerful beliefs, they are just beliefs and

beliefs can be changed. How can this be done?”

The workshop that Peter Heslin and his colleagues developed for managers starts off with a scientific article and a video about how the brain changes with learning. It's a critical first step toward a growth mindset for people to realize how much learning can transform the brain. Next, the workshop asks participants to do four things. First, to think of at least 3 reasons why it's important to recognize that people can develop their abilities. Second, to think of an area in which they once had low ability but now perform well, and to explain how they were able to make the change. Third, to write an email to a struggling (hypothetical) protégé about how abilities can be developed, with examples of how they themselves had dealt with career challenges. And fourth, to remember times they had seen someone learn to do something they never thought this person could do, and to reflect upon how this happened and what it means.

As I mentioned above, this workshop led to marked changes in managers' attitudes and behavior. Aside from creating workshops for individuals, organizations can create a growth-mindset environment in the workplace as a whole. What would this involve? They might present important skills as learnable and not as abilities that only gifted people have and other people will never have. They also might give feedback in a way that fosters the development of abilities. Further, they might define managers as resources for learning, not just evaluators of ability. And finally, they might convey that the organization values learning and dedication, and not just ready-made genius or talent.”

Coert: “Imagine we'd take the growth mindset and we'd start to apply it more to practices like personnel selection, management development and organizational change programs. What

do you think would be different? What are some of the changes you'd envision?"

Carol: "Many people (in a fixed mindset) think that personnel selection is simply about selecting the brightest people and turning them loose. Yet years of research have shown that we are not good at predicting future success on the basis of current assessments of talent. In other words, we can measure people's present skills, aptitudes, and strengths, but this does not translate well into their future performance. Why? Because it doesn't tell us about people's potential for growth in the future-how they might perform with the right commitment, effort, and training. In fact, more and more research is showing that people's level of commitment, effort, and continued training is what eventually separates the most successful people from their equally talented, but less successful, peers. This is true in sports, science, and the arts-and it is becoming clear that it is true in business, too.

This means that the best strategy is not simply to hire the ablest people we can find, but also to look for people who embody a growth mindset: a zest for learning (and teaching), openness to feedback, and an ability to confront and surmount obstacles.

It also means training leaders and managers to believe in growth, in addition to training them in the specifics of effective communication and mentoring. Indeed, as I suggested earlier, a growth mindset workshop might well be a first step in any major training program.

You asked what would be different? The whole atmosphere would be different. In a fixed mindset environment, where people are evaluating each other's brains and talent, it's each person for him or herself. Everyone is so busy impressing everyone else and competing for recognition that no one is learning, enjoying their job, cooperating, or thinking of the longer-term health of the company. This is what happened at Enron.

If a company instead fosters a growth mindset, people will feel freer to share their knowledge, skills and visions, to the benefit of the organization. This is exactly what happened when great leaders like Lou Gerstner or Anne Mulcahy took over IBM and Xerox".

Coert: "What are some of the changes you'd expect in schools? How would education and classroom management be different?"

Carol: "We've seen these changes. When students go through a growth mindset workshop, the changes can be dramatic. First, once students understand the idea that their brain forms new connections when they apply themselves and learn-that they are in charge of their mind and its growth-they become more engaged. Before the workshop, many students thought of school as a place where you performed and teachers judged you. After the workshop they saw it more as a place where, with the teachers' help, you learned things that made you smarter. Many students said that as they studied or paid attention in class, they pictured their neurons forming new connections.

Next, after the workshop, students studied differently and more effectively. Instead of just trying to cram things into their heads the night before a test, they studied well in advance, made sure they understood the material, and enlisted the teacher's help when they needed it. As a result, they learned more and earned higher grades.

This doesn't just happen for low-achieving students. In research by Joshua Aronson and his colleagues, even students at an elite university came to value and enjoy their schoolwork more (and earned higher grades) after a growth mindset workshop.

Teachers have told me that classroom management becomes less of an issue when they teach from a growth mindset

perspective. They and the students are on the same side—they are collaborators in the development of students' intelligence. Many students who formerly spent their time figuring out ways to sabotage the teacher, now spend their time making their neurons grow”.

Coert: “What are some of the research questions you would like to explore in the future?”

Carol: “There are so many questions still to explore. One major question is how organizations or settings convey a fixed or growth mindset. For example, in a new study we are finding that even talking about geniuses and extolling them conveys a fixed mindset, whereas talking about people who fell in love with their chosen profession and developed amazing skills conveys a growth mindset. We want to understand all the different ways the mindsets are communicated.

There are still many questions about how people function when they are in a fixed or growth mindset. For example, in new research we are seeing that when people experience a blow to their self-esteem, those in a fixed mindset repair their self-image by trying to feel that they are better than others. In a business setting this might take the form of a boss blaming or taking things out on an employee. Those in a growth mindset recover their self-esteem by trying to improve themselves and correct their deficiencies. We would love to know even more about the inner workings of the mindsets.

Perhaps the most challenging research question is how best to create change in an organization as a whole. So far, we've had a great deal of success changing individuals' mindsets, but reorienting beliefs, values, and practices on a larger, system-wide scale is a more daunting (and exciting) task.”

Coert Visser

Visit <http://solutionfocusedchange.blogspot.com/>

References

- Aronson, J., Fried, C.B., & Good, C. (2002). [Reducing stereotype threat and boosting academic achievement of African-American students: The role of conceptions of intelligence](#). *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.
- Dweck, C. (2006). [Mindset, the new psychology of success](#). Random House
- Dweck, C. S. (2002). Beliefs that make smart people dumb. In R. J. Sternberg (Ed.). *Why smart people do stupid things*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- [Brief video-fragments with Carol Dweck](#) on Human Intelligence Website.
- Heslin, P., Wanderwalle, D. & Latham, G. (2006). [Engagement in employee coaching: The role of managers' implicit person theory](#). *Personnel psychology*.