



## Mindset

### The New Psychology of Success

By Dr. Carol S. Dweck

The 2006 Olympics were held in Turin, Italy ... or as the Italians call it, Torino.

Torino was certainly not an Olympics to remember for the North American teams. The Canadian men's hockey team unthinkably finished in seventh place – totally stunning their fans back home. Meanwhile the Americans finished even worse, in eighth place.

Shockingly, from speed skating to bobsled to figure skating, the usually dominant American and Canadian squads kept coming up short. Why was Torino so lackluster for them? In the end, many of our stars, after losing to lesser-known athletes from underdog nations, simply threw up their hands and said “I guess I didn't have it today.”

As casual fans of the game, most of us are prepared to accept it when our favorite athletes turn in a lousy performance, and then moan after the fact that they just didn't “have it” that day. We drown our sorrows in our beer and move on, looking ahead to the next match (or the next Olympics in four years' time).

But if you're anything like Dr. Carol Dweck of Stanford University – one of the world's leading researchers in the field of personal motivation – you might not be so quick to let those athletes off the hook. Instead, if you had the chance, you might ask them a couple of important follow-up questions: “What exactly is this ‘it,’ and is it something you just wait for or is it something you dig down and find?”

Over several decades of research Carol Dweck has looked at real champions – athletes who almost never choke when the going gets tough. Take Jack Nicklaus for example. How many times in his pro career do you think this champion golfer blew a shot when a tournament depended on it?

Once!

Did he always feel great, and were the conditions perfect on every one of those winning occasions? Probably not, but Jack soldiered on.

So what happened to North America's 2006 Olympic squad? We'll never know for

sure. But Carol Dweck's hunch is that those athletes may have been the victims of too much praise. Told constantly by well-meaning coaches, family, fans and the media how much innate talent they had going into Torino, these athletes may have relied too heavily on it to carry them through.

In *Mindset*, Dweck shows that praising people only for their talent – as opposed to their hard work, good strategies, or even good fortune – does not build mental toughness, or give them lasting confidence when the going gets rough. Instead, it may even make them weaker in the face of adversity. People who believe they're naturally more talented than others often expect "it" to always be there when they need it, and they may not learn how to go and find it.

## Ingredients of a Winning Mindset

If you had to choose, which of the following would you prefer to have in your life: lots of success, praise and validation? Or lots of opportunity and challenge?

If you chose "opportunity and challenge," then there's a good chance that you have what Dweck refers to as "a growth-oriented mindset." And according to her research, it's having this type of mindset that accounts for more of our success and overall happiness in life than any other characteristic.

Your mindset can profoundly affect the way you lead your life. It can determine whether you become the person you want to be and whether or not you achieve success in life.

If you believe, as many people unfortunately do, that your qualities are more or less carved in stone, then you have what Dweck calls a "fixed mindset." And if you have this type of a mindset, then there's a good chance you'll feel an unrelenting sense of urgency to prove yourself to others. Why do you behave that way? Because, if you believe that you have only a fixed amount of intelligence, a certain personality, and a certain type of character – well, then you'd better prove that you have it in spades.

If you have a largely fixed mindset, this need to constantly prove yourself becomes a never-ending script that plays out in the classroom, throughout your career, and even in your relationships. Consciously or unconsciously, every key situation calls for a confirmation of your intelligence, personality, or character. Every new situation is evaluated: Will I succeed or fail? Will I look smart or dumb? Will I be accepted or rejected? Will I feel like a winner or a loser?

If that sounds like an awfully heavy burden to carry throughout your whole life, it is. But, if you choose to adopt a more growth-oriented mindset, then all of the traits you have today - both the good ones and the bad ones - are not simply a hand you're dealt and have to live with, always trying to convince yourself and others that, "you have a royal flush when you're secretly worried it's a pair of tens." When you adopt a growth mindset, the hand you're dealt is just the starting point.

A growth mindset is based on the fundamental belief that your basic qualities are

things you can cultivate through your efforts. A growth mindset holds that a person's true potential in life is unknown (and unknowable); that it's impossible to foresee what can be accomplished with years of passion, toil, and training.

## The Growth Mindset in Action

So what does a growth mindset look like in action? Well, imagine you've decided to learn Spanish and you've signed up for a night class. In the early going, you're finding it awfully difficult. A few sessions into the course, the instructor calls you to the front of the room and starts firing questions at you one after another.

First, put yourself in a fixed mindset. You're standing in front of a whole bunch of people who don't know you, and this is your one chance to make a good first impression. Your ability is on the line. No, check that – your whole reputation as a person is on the line! Suddenly you can feel everyone's eyes on you. You can see the instructor's face as he's evaluating you, and you imagine him cringing inside. You feel your ego starting to waver. How well do you think you'll perform?

Now put yourself in a growth mindset. Suddenly, the pressure's off. "Of course you're a novice," writes Dweck. "That's why you're here. You're here to learn. The teacher is not a scary figure who's there to judge and look down on you. He's just a resource for learning." Now, can you feel your mind opening up?

Dweck's fundamental message is this: We can change our mindset. We have a choice. Our mindset is just a system of beliefs. They're powerful beliefs to be sure, but they're just something in our mind; and we can change our mind.

People who choose to adopt a growth mindset know that it takes time for their potential to flower. This isn't just some touchy-feely sentiment. It's based in hard facts. Many of the most accomplished people of our era were considered to have no future early in their careers. Jackson Pollock, Elvis Presley, Ray Charles, Lucille Ball, and Charles Darwin were all thought to have little potential in their chosen fields. And in some of these cases, it may have been true that they didn't stand out from the crowd early on. But thank goodness they chose to persist; and look at the legacies they left.

## How to Judge Potential in Others

The point of Dweck's story about Jackson, Elvis, Ray, Lucille, and Charles is that we rely far too much on looking at someone's innate talent, or their natural intellect for that matter, as a measure of their ultimate potential. In Dweck's experience, an assessment of someone's abilities at one point in time has little value for predicting that person's potential ability in the future. If you're a manager who's responsible for making decisions around hiring and promotions, this is something Dweck would want you to keep in mind. Or, if you happen to be a teacher, this is something you really must keep in mind. For Dweck, it's truly disturbing how many grade school teachers are so quick to judge the future potential of their students – and then treat them

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accordingly – based on such shoddy evidence.

Still, it's hard to blame managers and teachers for placing such a high premium on natural talent when making predictions about someone's future performance. As Dweck explains, it is pervasive in Western culture to value talent highly, and managers and school teachers are just a product of the culture. For example, as children, we all read *The Tortoise and the Hare*, which was supposed to teach us that hard work trumps natural ability. "Slow and steady wins the race," we learned. But, really, did any of us ever want to be the tortoise?

Of course not. Nobody wants to emulate the slow and plodding tortoise. We just wanted to be a less foolish hare. We wanted to be swift as the wind and a bit more strategic than he was – say, not taking quite so many snoozes before the finish line.

According to Dweck, stories like *The Tortoise and the Hare*, actually give hard work a bad name. They reinforce the idea that effort is only for plodders, and leave the impression that only in rare instances – when talented people unexpectedly drop the ball - will plodders be able to sneak through and steal one. This is a myth.

Dweck isn't the only one to key in on this. Malcolm Gladwell has also suggested that as a society we value natural, effortless accomplishment over achievement through effort. We endow our heroes with superhuman abilities that led them inevitably toward their greatness. "It's as if Midori popped out of the womb fiddling, Michael Jordan dribbling, and Picasso doodling," writes Dweck.

Nevertheless, just because the so-called "talent myth" is pervasive in our culture, that doesn't mean we have to succumb to it. Those of us who choose to adopt a growth mindset can believe something very different. We can see the truth – i.e. even geniuses have to work very hard for their achievements because it's effort that ignites their ability and turns it into accomplishment.

So, you might ask, if you can't base someone's future potential on the talent and ability they display today, how can you make predictions around future success? Obviously, if you're going to make a long-term investment in someone, you need to be able to imagine how they might act in the future. Is there really a reliable way to judge future potential? Well, NASA thinks so.

When NASA recruits astronauts, they typically reject people with pure histories of success and instead select people who have had significant failures and bounced back from them. The ability to handle adversity is critical to one's success as an astronaut. Closer to Earth, Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, chose executives on the basis of their capacity for growth. He promoted people who were hard-working, and who deliberately sought out tough problems - even if they didn't always succeed in solving them.

If you're someone who holds a fixed mindset, then Welsh's hiring approach may seem a bit off to you. After all, in the fixed mindset, everything is about the outcome. If you set out to tackle a big problem, and you fail – or even if you succeed but didn't

do it in a showy way – then it’s all been wasted effort. In contrast, the growth mindset allows us to value what we’re doing regardless of the outcome. We’re tackling problems, charting new courses, working on important issues, and trying our best. Maybe we haven’t yet found the cure for cancer, but the search has been worthwhile, and we’re getting closer every day.

If you’re still having trouble letting go of the talent myth, then just think about Michael Jordan. Jordan was not born a star basketball player. There’s even some question about whether he ever had great natural talent. Folks can debate that point. But what’s abundantly clear is: Michael Jordan was the hardest-working athlete, perhaps in the history of sport.

It’s well known that Michael Jordan was cut from his high school varsity team. He wasn’t recruited by the college he wanted to play for (North Carolina State) and he wasn’t drafted by the first two NBA teams that could have chosen him. But Jordan never let any of this get in his way. At college, he constantly worked on his weaknesses – his defensive game and his ball handling and shooting. His coaches were taken aback by his willingness to work harder than anyone else.

Even at the height of his success and fame Jordan’s dogged practice remained legendary. A former Bulls coach once called him “a genius who constantly wants to upgrade his genius.”

For Jordan, success stems not from some innate talent, but from his mind. “After seeing the great Michael Jordan in action,” writes Dweck, “you would think the sports world would start to see the fundamental relationship between practice and improvement – and between the mind and performance – and stop harping so much on innate physical talent. Yet it’s almost as if they refuse to see.”

Again, this is likely because it’s so ingrained in our culture to prize natural endowment over earned ability. We like to think of our champions as super human beings who were born different from us. We don’t want to think of them as relatively ordinary people.

This blind mythology is hurting American corporations which have become too obsessed with talent. The gurus at McKinsey & Company, a premier management consulting firm, insist that just as there are naturals in sports, there are naturals in business. Just as sports teams write huge checks to sign outsized talent, so too should corporations. For talent is the key to beating the competition.

Malcolm Gladwell and Carol Dweck both believe that this “talent mind-set” is at the root of some huge corporate meltdowns. An overreliance on talent created the blueprint for Enron’s toxic culture, for instance, and sowed the seeds of that firm’s demise.

As we now know, Enron recruited big talent, mostly people with advanced degrees, which is not in itself so bad. It also paid them big money, which is not that terrible. But by putting complete faith in talent, Enron committed a fatal error: It fostered

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a culture that worshiped talent, thereby forcing its employees to look and act extraordinarily talented. Basically, it fostered a fixed mindset.

As Dweck explains, when people work for a company that esteems them for their innate talent above all else, they tend to run and hide when their image is at risk. Or, as Gladwell put it, “They will not stand up to investors and the public and admit that they were wrong. They’d sooner lie (to preserve their image).”

Clearly, any company that cannot admit mistakes, or self-correct, cannot thrive.

## Fostering A Growth Mindset

Back in the late 1990s, business guru Jim Collins set out to discover what made some companies move from being simply good, to being truly great. He published his findings in 2001 in a book called, not surprisingly, *Good to Great*, which has since gone on to sell over three million copies.

To answer the central question of what it was that allowed some companies, across a whole range of industries, to make the leap to greatness, while other comparable companies just held steady at good, Collins and his research team embarked on an exhaustive five-year study. As it turned out, Collins found there were several critical success factors, but one particular factor stood head and shoulders above the rest. The single factor that was absolutely key was the type of leader who led the company into greatness. These leaders were not the larger-than life, charismatic types who oozed ego and self-proclaimed talent. They were self-effacing people who constantly asked questions and had the ability to confront the most brutal answers; to look failures in the face, even their own, while maintaining faith that they would succeed in the end.

In other words, these leaders all had a growth mindset.

And just as the world’s top CEOs all tend to share a growth mindset, so too do the excellent parents. Of course, most caring parents would tend to see themselves as nurturing their children’s growth. No decent parent would ever consciously think to himself, “I wonder what I can do today to undermine my children, turn them off learning, and limit their achievement.” Yet, many of the things we do often send kids the wrong message.

“Parents think they can hand children permanent confidence - like a gift - by praising their brains and talent,” writes Dweck. Unfortunately, the wrong kind of praise “makes children doubt themselves as soon as anything is hard or anything goes wrong.” In her view, if parents want to give their children a gift, the best thing they can do is to teach their kids to love challenges, be intrigued by mistakes and enjoy effort. That way children don’t have to be slaves of praise. They will have a set of beliefs that will allow them to build and repair their own confidence.

Does this mean we can’t praise our children enthusiastically when they do something great? Not at all. It just means that we should keep away from a certain kind of

praise – praise that implies that we’re proud of them for their raw intelligence or natural talent, rather than for the hard work they put in. For example, instead of congratulating your daughter for being “so smart” the next time she successfully completes a big project for school, Dweck suggests you say something like: “That project was so long and involved. I really admire the way you concentrated for a couple of hours every night and finished it.”

Children who believe that effort leads to improvement are far more likely to up their game, especially when the going gets tough. The same principle applies to all of us, especially as we get older.

## Letting Go of a Fixed Mindset

If you’re someone who exhibits more of a fixed mindset, you may be wondering what you can do to become more growth-focused.

If you’re committed to making the shift, Dweck suggests that, as a first step, you make a “growth mindset plan.” This involves thinking carefully about something you need to do, something you want to learn, or a problem you have to confront.

What is it? Now, make a concrete, written plan. When will you follow through on your plan? Where will you do it? How will you do it? Think about all the steps in vivid detail.

These concrete growth plans – plans you can really visualize – about when, where and how you’re going to do something usually lead to high levels of follow-through, which, of course, ups your chances of success.

Plus, just learning about the growth mindset can trigger a big shift in the way you think about yourself, and your life. Dweck has observed this effect countless times with her students at Stanford when she explains the differences between the two types of mindsets.

## Conclusion

There’s no shortage of smart, talented people in your community, amongst your circle of friends, and in your workplace. One way to get ahead in the world, and

to try to achieve your goals, is to act as though you’re smarter and more talented than the guy sitting next to you. If you’re lucky, you may even be able to pull it off. But chances are you’ll stress yourself out tremendously in the process. And you may even subconsciously adopt a fear of failure – basically a fear of looking stupid in the eyes of others – which will hamper your willingness to take risks, stifle your ability to innovate, and ultimately limit your chances of success.

Perhaps a better way to get ahead is to take a page from Dr. Carol Dweck and adopt a growth mindset. If you take that route, you will wake up every day asking yourself “What can I learn today?” In time, your personal growth will become almost like

an obsession, and the fruits of your labor will ultimately come in the form of more achievement, and higher recognition. If Dweck is right, then pretty soon you'll find that it's actually your growth mindset that sets you apart from the pack. Because when you're constantly looking for even the smallest ways to grow, while others around you play it safe and stagnate, then you will always be gaining ground. And you'll never look back.