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Carol S. Dweck's *Mindset* Offers Insights for Legal Professionals

Dweck's powerful message boils down to the idea that how you view yourself has a huge impact on how you live your life.

*Mindset*¹, by Stanford University psychologist Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D., is a highly popular and potentially valuable addition to self-improvement literature. First published in 2006, Dweck's terminology, insights and recommendations have been widely adopted by the business community, professionals and educators, among others.

“Get Your Mind Right”

The book is subtitled “The New Psychology of Success, How We Can Learn To Fulfill Our Potential.” A quote from Dweck sums up her beliefs, “For twenty years, my research has shown that the view you adopt of yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life.” In other words, in the words of Cool Hand Luke's nemesis, “you've got to get your mind right.”

In the service of getting our minds right, Dweck introduces two observed categories of self-perception: the “fixed mindset” and the “growth mindset.” While acknowledging that a person may display each during different times and circumstances, she asserts that most individuals tend to consistently display one mindset or the other. Furthermore, these mindsets shape behavior, and are critical components of our capacity for fulfillment and success.

Delving into the Mindsets

The fixed mindset is “the world of fixed traits--success is about proving you're smart or talented. Validating yourself.” It is the belief that one has certain strengths and abilities, as well as corresponding limitations, which don't change. The growth mindset is “the world of changing qualities--it's about stretching yourself to learn something new. Developing yourself.” Dweck's conclusions grew from her experience observing teachers of children. The fixed mindset leads children to avoid challenges, to shine by taking on easier work rather than tackling more difficult subjects or problems, a pattern which often follows into adulthood.

By contrast, the growth mindset enables one to appreciate opportunities to learn, and to open new doors through challenge, and even failure. The fixed mindset child relishes his high test scores or grades which reinforce what he has been told, that he is “smart.” This leads him to prove himself over and over, by sticking to what he does best. Failure is to be avoided. With the growth mindset, it is the effort that is valued. People enjoy and grow from challenges and change--they are always learning. In other words, she asks “[i]s success about learning--or proving you're smart?”

¹ Ballentine Books Trade Paper Edition, 2016, originally published in slightly different form in 2006 by Random House.

A Capacity for Change

Perhaps the most significant conclusion Dweck has drawn from her observations about this dichotomy of mindsets is that we have the capacity to change. Harnessing our understanding of these mindsets allows us to go from the rigid, defensive approach of a fixed mindset to the realization of our potential from the growth mindset. The heart of her message is that our own beliefs about our ability to change and grow have a profound impact on our paths through life. Through greater awareness of these differences, we can move more efficiently toward a growth mindset, and help others make that transition.

Growth Through Awareness

Awareness of these two mindsets allows a person to see a path toward growth in a new light, and to steer in a new direction. Likewise, it gives a parent, educator, supervisor or counsellor fresh insight and direction in leading others. Dweck acknowledges that such change does not mean that one can master anything he wishes; all have certain strengths and weaknesses. But while the person with a fixed mindset may give up too soon, or never even try, the person with a growth mindset recognizes that patience and hard work can open new doors, and that the struggle to learn is to be valued, not avoided. Dweck gives inspiring examples of teachers who have had remarkable success by pushing students who were previously thought to have low potential. Her book is filled with practical, awareness-based advice for parents and teachers about encouraging growth, such as avoiding labels and stereotypes.

What Doesn't Work

Less convincing to this reader are Dweck's chapters on sports figures and corporations. She cites examples of success or failure which she attributes to a fixed or growth mindset. She asserts that even the very successful, such as Lee Iacocca, can slide into the fixed mindset, "the CEO disease," resting on their laurels, and developing an aloof self-esteem which prevents growth and learning. She points to companies which she believes displayed a collective mindset, leading to success or collapse. She asserts that Enron failed because of a fixed mindset culture—an analysis which oversimplifies the causes of its failure, including outright fraud. In contrast she attributes the remarkable growth of General Electric to the growth mindset of Jack Welch, whose management style was once highly acclaimed but is now sometimes discredited. In recent years the GE story has been very different, a remarkable decline (primarily after the book's publication) due, in part, to a failure to build a solid succession team. While a fixed mindset culture may doom an organization to mediocrity, organizational success or failure is often the result of far more complex factors than Dweck suggests. That said, as many experts have observed, an organization that emphasizes the status quo, and squelches independent critical thinking, is unlikely to thrive.

The Verdict: Old Wine in a New Bottle, or a New Vintage?

Self-improvement books promoting self-confidence have long been a staple of popular literature—for example, *The Power of Positive Thinking* was a best seller in the 1950's and is

still widely read. Is *Mindset* simply old wine in a new bottle, or a truly new approach to self-improvement? How reliable are Dweck's conclusions?

Critics have observed that many of her assertions have not been validated by controlled studies. Her examples are often anecdotal or based on highly simplified analyses. Many characterizations of individuals or organizations as having one mindset or the other seem arbitrary and results-based, and overlook the wide range of other internal and external factors influencing behavior and outcomes.

Yet Dweck provides both a new vocabulary and fresh approaches to personal growth that have been widely accepted. Her recommendations to parents and teachers offer a plan to encourage children to value effort and challenges rather than easy results. She explains how casual praise may have unintended, negative results. She gives us a different view of what is truly "intelligent." She draws from the work of noted psychologist Robert Sternberg, who believes that the most important component of gaining expertise "is not some fixed prior ability, but purposeful engagement." She adds that "it's not always the people who start out the smartest who end up the smartest."

How Does Dweck's Message Help Lawyers?

This surely is a good read for those finding themselves in a new role of home-school teacher. So what else can lawyers learn from Dweck? Certainly a useful new vocabulary, and greater awareness and understanding of how individuals view challenges and change. Lawyers, perhaps uniquely, must often approach problems with a fixed mindset—to avoid risk to our clients, we anticipate problems and look to what has worked in the past in response. Statutes, regulations and cases must be followed, and attention to detail is mandatory. But the successful professional must also value growth and change, and be willing to explore fresh ideas. As Covid-19 has brought home like never before, we must stay on top of technological advances to be productive and efficient. Those representing business clients must keep pace with changing corporate expectations and practices. Ongoing training should be emphasized and focus on building a culture of growth, collaboration and independent thinking, what Dweck calls a "culture of development." Her insights provide valuable tools for personal growth and change. One need not accept all of Dweck's conclusions to benefit from her recommendations.

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*The preceding article was researched, written and reviewed as part of the work of the NCBA Professional Vitality Committee ("PVC"). The lead author was **George Evans** of Clearly Bespoke Strategies, Inc. Please direct comments and suggestions to [Erna Womble](#), Committee Chair, and [Holly Morris](#), Communities Manager. See more of the [PVC's compendium](#) of articles and blog posts at (<https://ncbar.org/members/committees/professional-vitality/>).*