

Growth-Minded Leadership



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Adopting a growth mindset has been shown to be a critical indicator of personal and professional success. This article explores steps individual leaders can take to help develop their teams' and individual team members' potential through continuous growth.

Growth-Minded Leadership

Pigeonholed

“I don’t think Sam is cut out to be a supervisor. I see him more as a technical guy, or a task leader.”

This assessment of Sam (not their real name), expressed by his manager, struck me immediately as off. What struck me was not that he was wrong about whether Sam was the best candidate for the supervisor job for which he had applied. He wasn’t, and – absent the right support and encouragement – would probably continue to struggle with the interpersonal skills the position required.

Rather, what struck me was that this manager had effectively pigeonholed a member of his staff into a particular role, the more technical job of managing tasks and work products, despite Sam’s expressed interest in serving in a different capacity. Our conversation convinced me that this manager’s mindset was that people fell into distinct types. *You can be Type 1 or Type 2. You can’t be both.*

This view seemed wrong to me then. It seems even more incorrect to me now. I wish that this was a story about how Sam proved the department manager wrong and became a successful supervisor. Sadly, he never got that chance. But his story still demonstrates a key element of leadership that I think is worth exploring. I call that approach “Growth-minded Leadership,” for reasons that will be clear shortly, and it is foundational to successfully developing your team and its individual members to their fullest potential.

Growth vs. Fixed Mindsets

All the concepts in this piece owe a great deal to Dr. Carol Dweck, who coined the term “growth mindset” through her research into the role that mindsets play in personal and professional achievement. Her seminal work is [Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#).

Dr. Dweck introduced the idea that the way individuals approach new tasks or the need to learn something new tends to fall somewhere on a continuum

between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. When we operate with a fixed mindset, we tend to think of intelligence and abilities as innate, avoid challenges and hard work, and feel threatened by others’ feedback and even by their successes. In contrast, a growth mindset enables us to pursue new abilities through hard work, embrace risks, persist through obstacles, and perceive others as sources of inspiration and helpful feedback.

It should come as no surprise that Dr. Dweck’s research found that success in virtually every field and endeavor was greater for individuals who tended to adopt a growth mindset compared to those who tended toward a fixed mindset. This has powerful implications for personal achievement and satisfaction.

Her work doesn’t stop there. In fact, Dr. Dweck discusses how a [growth mindset can contribute to the success of entire organizations](#). Companies with a growth mindset emphasize staff potential and opportunities for learning over credentials and past results. Their employees tend to be more engaged and innovative.

But corporate cultures are notoriously difficult to change. For an individual leader hoping tap into the potential of a growth mindset, what approaches can they take?

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Growth-Minded Leadership enables teams and individual members to realize their fullest potential through continuous learning. Leaders who realize such development do so by demonstrating a growth mindset about themselves, encouraging a growth mindset in others, and actively cultivating continuous growth in their teams and team members. Growth-Minded Leaders reward risk taking, create a culture of feedback, praise progress, and facilitate future successes.

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Reward Risk Taking

There is no growth without some amount of risk. Fear of failure is a significant obstacle, especially when failure can impact pay and advancement. One organization I worked with mitigated staff fears of failing by taking on a “stretch” job by changing performance reviews to place greater emphasis on the difficulty of the roles individuals pursued. Someone who did a fair job in a role perceived as exceptionally difficult rated comparably to someone who excelled in more comfortable role. As an individual leader, you can encourage risk taking by celebrating team members when they take appropriate risks and fail, just as much as when they succeed.

Create a Culture of Feedback

Growth requires feedback to affirm progress and correct mistakes. Therefore, a key element of Growth-Minded Leadership is fostering an environment in which feedback is readily given and willingly accepted, even sought out. Team members thrive when they understand their progress and areas for improvement. Teams excel when input is given, received, and acted on up and down the chain of command. Comfort with communicating hard truths enables organizations to uncover issues, adapt, and innovate.

Growth-Minded Leaders can create a culture of feedback by developing safe spaces for honest communication. One successful approach is to make routine the use of retrospectives or capturing lessons learned for the purpose of gaining knowledge, without assigning blame for mistakes. This is an opportunity to lead by example – leaders can make a point of seeking feedback from their teams, reacting with gratitude, and adjusting ac-

cordingly (if you want to hone this skill, I highly recommend [Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well](#)).

Praise Progress

Dr. Dweck’s research showed that children who are praised for their intelligence tend to fall into a fixed mindset, whereas children praised for the effort they put into learning something new tend to exhibit a growth mindset. This is not to say that leaders should give out “A’s for effort” – [rewarding effort alone is not the point](#). But when staff pursue stretch goals or roles, it is important to acknowledge their progress along the way, not just their results. Leaders can set progressive performance goals and highlight measured improvements during feedback sessions (which should be routine within a culture of feedback).



Facilitate Future Successes

Leaders are uniquely positioned to encourage growth through the way they fill assignments and allocate resources. Organizations have increased hiring of “nontraditional” candidates, including those without college degrees, amid shortages of skilled labor. This requires factoring growth potential (and a demonstrated enthusiasm for learning new skills) into hiring decisions. For existing staff, leaders can create growth positions to help develop team members interested in attaining new heights.

Individuals will likely need assistance to acquire additional knowledge and develop new skills. Growth-Minded Leaders can support them through training, by recommending mentors (as well as being a mentor themselves), and by encouraging pursuit of development goals.

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Pigeonholed No More

Let's revisit Sam's situation. How might Sam's manager have responded to Sam's application with Growth-Minded Leadership? He could start by praising Sam for even taking the risk of applying for a stretch position. He might share his honest assessment of Sam's strengths as well as the skills he had yet to develop that would be necessary as a supervisor. The manager could encourage Sam to acquire those skills by offering to be or recommending a mentor or offering to send Sam to a training program normally reserved for supervisors. If he were willing to take a bigger risk himself, the manager might even identify a stepping-stone role – or create a new one! – for Sam to hone his interpersonal skills.

Maybe Sam would have succeeded in his endeavor to be a supervisor. Maybe the requisite skills would have remained elusive. But at the very least, he and his manager would have learned much in the process that a fixed mindset renders unknowable.

How do you exhibit Growth-minded Leadership in your organization? What risks have you encouraged your team members to take? How have you demonstrated that you believe your team members can be and accomplish greater things? And how are you investing in your own continuous growth?

About the Author

[David M. Wagner](#) has more than fifteen years' experience helping clients devise and execute effective social impact strategies. A "reformed engineer," David brings a unique viewpoint combining his leadership, systems thinking, and public policy experience. He is passionate about helping public service organizations conceive compelling futures for their communities and themselves and forge ambitious paths to realize those visions.

About Clear Mission Consulting, LLC

Clear Mission Consulting is committed to advancing social outcomes through holistic, systems-based strategies. We partner with public service-oriented organizations to make social programs more impactful by aligning services, public policy, and stakeholder needs.

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Links in Document

- 1) <https://bookshop.org/books/mindset-the-new-psychology-of-success/9780345472328>
- 2) <https://hbr.org/2014/11/how-companies-can-profit-from-a-growth-mindset>
- 3) <https://bookshop.org/books/thanks-for-the-feedback-the-science-and-art-of-receiving-feedback-well/9780143127130>
- 4) <https://hbr.org/2016/01/what-having-a-growth-mindset-actually-means>
- 5) <https://www.clearmissionconsulting.com/about>



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