



Positively Legal: Leading with a Growth Mindset

Skills and Professional Development



Emotions and actions are “[driven by a puppet-master behind the scenes: beliefs](#).” Our mindsets also stem from our beliefs and directly affect how we live our lives and how we lead our teams. Stanford University psychologist and mindset expert, [Carol Dweck](#) suggested that our ability to learn and grow is influenced by our beliefs in [our own intelligence and abilities](#) — as either fixed traits that we cannot change or as attributes that can be improved through effort.

The subconscious influence of our mindset also affects the way we lead — because teams also have mindsets. In an [article](#) Dweck co-authored for the *Harvard Business Review*, the authors stated “managers and organizational cultures often signal to employees what types of mindsets are valued on the job — such as whether employees should be singular in focus or open to new areas.”

Thankfully, our mindsets, like our beliefs, can change with the right understanding and effort.

Growth mindset vs fixed mindset

According to Dweck’s Mindset Theory, we all fall somewhere along a spectrum of beliefs. On one end of that spectrum is the fixed mindset — where people believe that their abilities, intelligence, and talent are all fixed traits.

[Tal Ben Shahar](#) described people with a fixed mindset as those who think they are either gifted and talented, in which case they will succeed in sports, relationships, and at work, or they are permanently deficient and consequently doomed to failure. He said someone with a fixed mindset finds [hard work threatening](#) “as it indicate[s] that her abilities are limited and that, by extension, she is, too.”

On the other end of the spectrum is a growth mindset, “the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts,” according to Dweck. In her [Ted Talk](#), she explained how the

word “yet” defines the growth mindset: “I haven’t learned how to do that, yet,” “I haven’t mastered that, yet,” or “I don’t understand that, yet.” Those with a growth mindset see obstacles as an opportunity for learning, recover quickly from mistakes, and see them as part of learning and growing.

Our mindsets are on a continuum. We may have a fixed mindset about one ability but a growth mindset about another. For example, we may think we are not very “sporty” and will be less likely to try out a new sport or challenging hiking holiday and miss opportunities for mental and physical growth, as well as making new friends.

On the other hand, we could have a growth mindset about learning a language or public speaking and be more likely to seek out opportunities where we can use these skills and continue to improve.

How to cultivate a growth mindset as an individual

Try some of these strategies to move towards a growth mindset:

- **Watch your language.** If you have never tried something or are in the process of learning it – remember, you have not mastered it – yet.
- **Celebrate the wins.** Small and big, individually, and with others. Use one success as a reminder when you are unsure whether you can achieve something else.
- **Remember that inherent talent only gets you so far, you also need hard work.** Anyone who has watched [“The Last Dance”](#) knows that, while Michael Jordan is inherently talented, he worked continuously to achieve this success.
- **Learn from your own mistakes.** Your own and those of others. Work on a strategy for the next time.
- **Change your relationship with the word “failure.”** [Sunrise Weatherman Sam Mac](#) in his recent book said that “failure is funny” as “viewers have seen me struggle to change a tyre and learn how to knit,” and “I am open and ready for things to go wrong as they often do in my segments.” Imagine bringing that attitude to daily work and life.
- **Reconsider how you receive feedback.** Challenge any response that comes from a fixed mindset — either ignoring the feedback, or thinking [“I can’t do anything right.”](#) Instead, cultivate a growth mindset — seriously consider the feedback, and work on solutions to address it.
- **Recognize gaps in your knowledge or skills as chances for growth.** As [Isabel Durate said](#), “a belief that with effort, training and determination, our abilities can be increased.”
- **Cultivate a growth career mindset** — The time and effort it takes to learn something new is a process that will help you [succeed in future roles](#).
- **Cultivate your interests.** Become a [“T-shaped person”](#) where the vertical line of the “T” represents one’s depth of expertise in a field, and the horizontal line represents one’s diverse interests, and ability to work and collaborate across areas.

How to cultivate a growth mindset as a team

Companies that embody a growth mindset encourage appropriate risk-taking, knowing that some risks won’t work out and reward employees for important and useful lessons learned, even if a project does not meet its original goals.

Try the following strategies to cultivate a growth mindset for your team:

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- Look for more [opportunities to give and share credit](#) with your team and business colleagues.
 - Reward learning and progress not unproductive effort.
 - Provide your team with coaching, encourage learning, and find opportunities for them in the workplace (including outside the legal team) where they can improve their skills.
 - Accept that each team member is a mix of growth and fixed mindsets in their own abilities and your coaching may need to change accordingly.
 - Focus on [trust-based learning](#), described by Deutsche Bank Global Head of Human Resources Michael Ilgner as “hand[ing] over the responsibility to people. You set them a task — ‘By tomorrow, we want to have that strategy done’ — then leave it up to them how effectively they use their time.”
 - Identify ways to continuously improve the legal function within your company.

Why we benefit from a growth mindset

Learning to cultivate a growth mindset and changing our beliefs and mindset will improve our well-being and that of our teams and colleagues. As [Dweck](#) articulated:

“For twenty years, my research has shown that the view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life. It can determine whether you become the person you want to be and whether you accomplish the things you value.”

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Caterina Cavallaro is managing legal counsel at VGW.

She combines technical legal skills with practical business understanding and a love of innovation, project management, and legal technology to improve ways of working within the legal industry. She is a member of the ACC's In-House In-Health and Legal Technology and Innovation Special Interest

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In addition to her legal skills she has a Diploma of Positive Psychology and Wellness and is a freelance writer. Her “Positively Legal” column for the *ACC Docket* focuses on the intersection of neuroscience, positive psychology, and in-house practice by interviewing experts and fellow lawyers and curating up to date quality research, podcasts and books to help lawyers learn to take control of their own wellness and support their careers.

Outside of work, Cavallaro loves traveling, snorkeling, meditating and spending time in nature.