

Leadership Guide – Fostering a Learning Mindset & Culture May 2020

Introduction

Creating a learning culture can transform a business. Current Microsoft CEO, Satya Nadella, grew the company's market capitalisation by \$250billion in four years by changing the culture from one of 'know it alls' to 'learn it alls'.

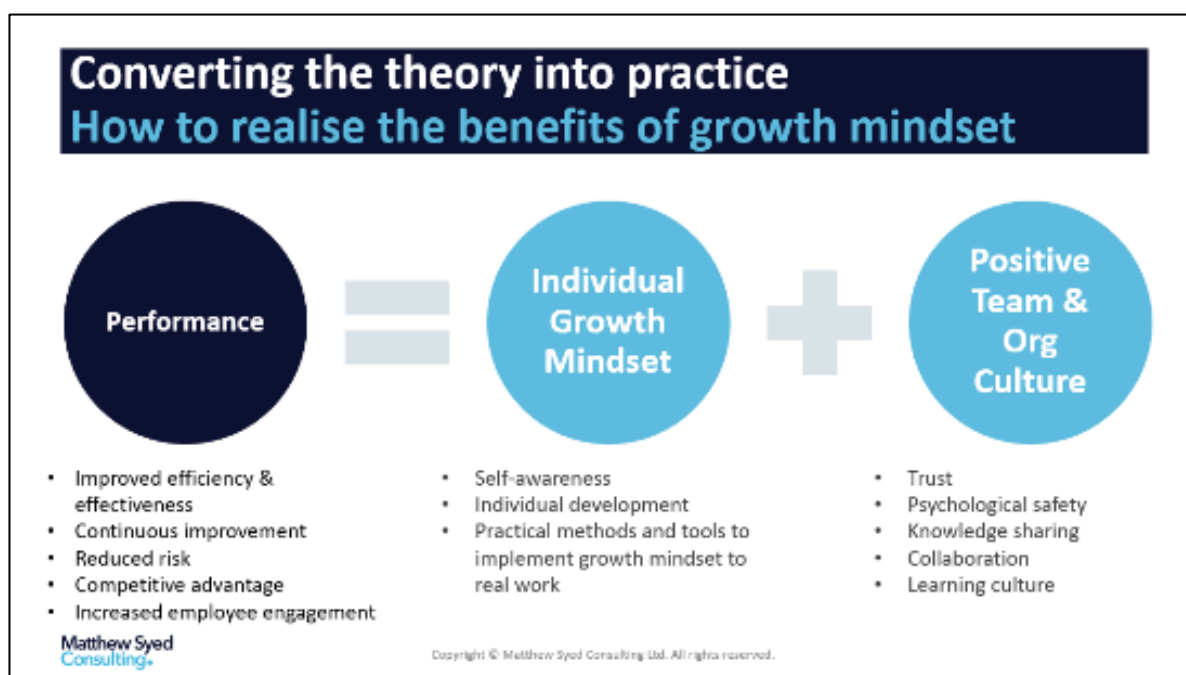
Learning is also particularly pertinent at this current time, during the coronavirus pandemic, as we adapt to new and dramatically changed circumstances or working environments, or perhaps invest time in personal growth.

This guide examines some of the individual and cultural traits associated with growth mindset that have a particular influence on a learning mindset and culture. It also provides some practical recommendations for strengthening learning, not only at an individual level but also across teams and organisations. It expands on a series of LinkedIn posts focused on learning that were published by Matthew Syed Consulting during the week of May 4th 2020, drawing on additional content from our learning platform, Mindset Transform, as well as insights from our Mindset Advantage psychometric analytics.

What does a learning mindset and culture look like?

The ability to learn and thereby to continually improve, or to pivot and adapt, may be the key contributor to why some companies fail while others succeed. Research by Deloitte¹ found that a strong learning culture within organisations has a significant and positive impact, for example:

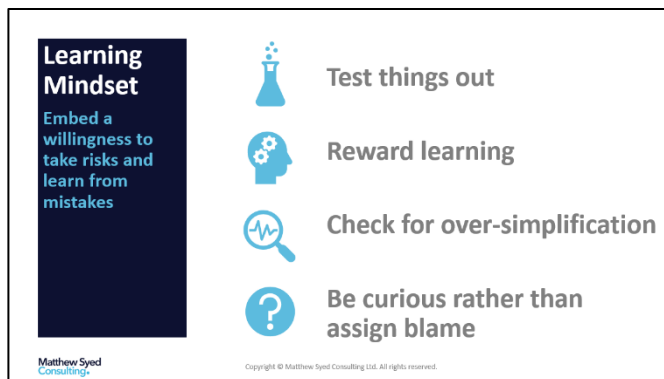
- ❖ They are 92 percent more likely to innovate
- ❖ They are 58 percent more prepared to meet future demand
- ❖ They experience 37 percent higher productivity



CEB, now Gartner, defined learning culture as ‘a culture that supports an open mindset, an independent quest for knowledge, and shared learning directed toward the mission and goals of the organization’.

However, it is worth adding that a learning mindset also includes a willingness to take risks and, crucially, to learn from mistakes, including the mistakes of others.

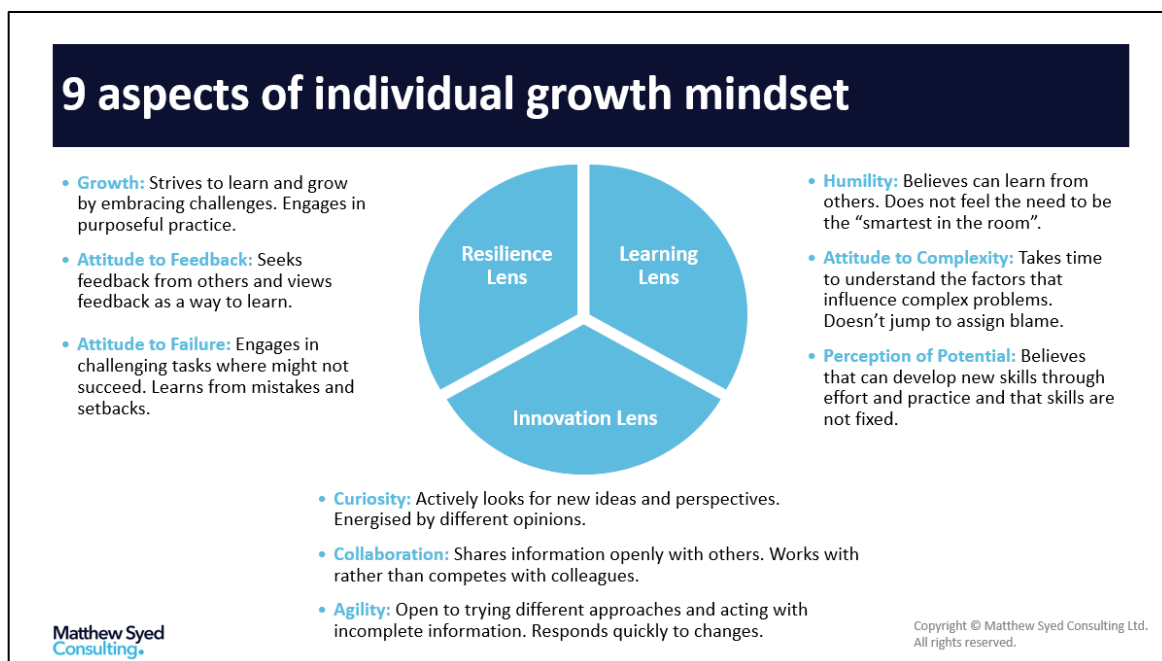
As Matthew Syed argues in Black Box Thinking in referring to the achievements of aviation, *“the most powerful engine of progress is to be found deep within the culture of the industry. It is an attitude that is easy to state, but whose wider application could revolutionize our attitude to progress: instead of denying failure, or spinning it, aviation learns from failure”*.



Leaders play a vital role in fostering a learning culture. Without a supportive environment, individual learning is hampered and its value diminished, while organisational learning is all but crushed, though it may exist within teams or pockets of an organisation. A learning culture requires combining the key individual growth mindset behaviours (see Figure 1) with a positive, nurturing culture.

If an organisation’s culture is to change, its leaders must be the first to demonstrate the mindset and behaviours they wish to see from their colleagues and employees. There are many tangible things leaders can do to strengthen their own learning mindset and foster a wider learning culture.

Figure 1. Learning as part of a growth mindset



Note: Many of these traits are closely linked and also impact on other lenses, curiosity also having an impact on learning, for example. Furthermore, strengthening a particular trait will often positively affect another, e.g. developing a positive attitude to failure will help increase agility.

Recommendations for fostering greater learning

Perception of Potential

Fixed views about what we, or others, are good at or not good at can drive fixed behaviours and limit what can be achieved. If we don't believe we can change or improve our skills with practice, then we are unlikely to be motivated to try. This can also make us hesitate to attempt or persevere at something new, or to take on challenges outside of our usual sphere of expertise or comfort zone. It can also prevent us from looking for the improvements that are always out there.

By contrast, if we believe we have no limits, then with purposeful practice and commitment we can improve performance in all walks of life. If an organisation develops a culture where its employees believe they are not limited by their current skills or ability, then learning and innovation will thrive.

The language we hear and use about success can drive different thinking and behaviours. Here are some examples of a fixed mindset narrative that can limit perception of potential:

“I/You don't have a brain for numbers”

“I am/You are not a natural at presenting”

“That's the way we always do things here”

Recognising effort and improvement is crucial to cultivating a growth mindset and will encourage people to see success as a journey. Instead of focusing on perfect execution, emphasise the importance of trying something new and learning from that experience in order to improve outcomes or skill levels. This is key to developing a healthier attitude towards failure and a learning culture.

Attitude to Complexity

In a complex world, there are likely to be many different factors that contribute to any given outcome. The ability to engage with complexity is vital when seeking to assess the reasons for any failure. It can be tempting to look for simple answers, but we lose valuable learning opportunities if we rush to blame rather than considering whether any underlying systemic issues were at play.

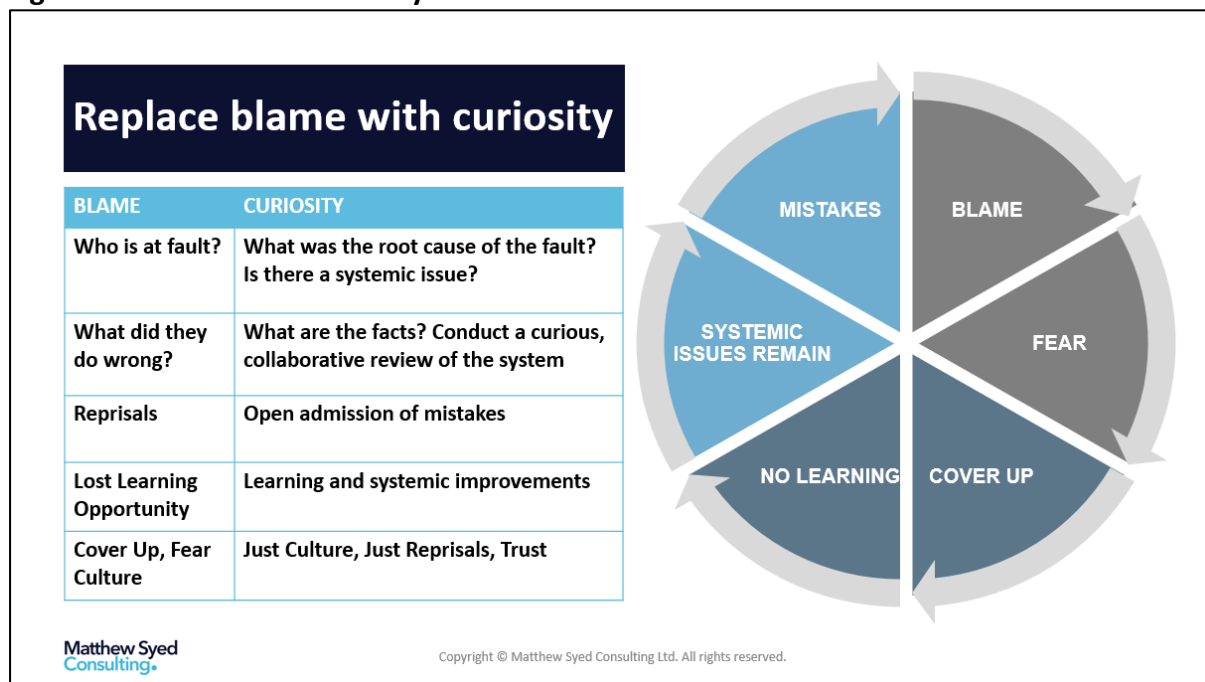
A blame culture results in cover-ups and systemic issues being left unresolved. Mistakes and problems persist because no learning is taking place or the root cause has not been addressed. John Gottman's research at the University of Washington² shows that blame and criticism reliably escalate conflict, leading to defensiveness, and eventually to disengagement.

Instead, leaders must seek to create a 'just' culture; one that is fair, with an understanding of complexity and where individuals understand that while they are accountable, they won't be unfairly blamed for their actions.

When something goes wrong or challenges arise, collectively review the situation. Be open about any setbacks of your own and encourage others to do the same. As well as increasing opportunities for learning and improvement, this will also help build greater trust.

Language again is a powerful technique for shifting the focus from blame to accountability. Figure 2 below provides some examples of how leaders can demonstrate curiosity instead of blame and encourage a collaborative conversation and a learning mindset.

Figure 2: Demonstrate curiosity not blame



Humility

In a fixed mindset, we tend to see success as something that happens for only the ‘smartest’ or ‘most talented’. This can lead us to want to protect our own status and reputation by covering up any gaps in our knowledge - at the expense of learning.

A learning mindset and culture require humility - being open to other viewpoints and acknowledging shortcomings so that we can continue to develop and improve. Humility shouldn’t be seen to conflict with self-confidence; confidence is important, particularly when leaders need to perform under pressure. Humility is simply the recognition that there is always potential for new ideas and headroom for improvements - no matter our qualifications, experience or expertise.

If we recognise that we can always learn and improve, it’s vital to create a positive mindset or environment for encouraging, and listening to, feedback and different opinions.

Some questions to consider include:

- ❖ are leaders regularly seeking feedback, from a variety of sources and not just supporters?
- ❖ do we have a hierarchy that inhibits less senior colleagues from speaking up and sharing ideas?
- ❖ do we avoid critical feedback that could help us improve?

Demonstrating and fostering humility will enable us and others to challenge assumptions, shape new ways of thinking, and increase learning.

Curiosity and Collaboration

People with a growth mindset will be curious and collaborative - two traits associated with innovation but that also drive greater learning. An inquisitive mind seeks new and fresh perspectives and is continually looking to learn. A collaborative person is open to the views and practices of others, as well as to sharing their own ideas and knowledge.

A culture that fosters curiosity and collaboration will break down silos, open up people and teams to greater learning and uncover opportunities for improvement.

Practical techniques that can be applied by individuals at all levels include:

- ❖ Asking others outside the team for their input on projects, ideas or working practices
- ❖ Gathering people from different backgrounds to approach problems from a fresh perspective - look outside your organisation for new ideas or possible solutions
- ❖ Encouraging “creative conflict”: candid communication and feedback, mutual respect and active listening, within a psychologically safe environment.
- ❖ Developing one’s network and building relationships with a diverse range of people, by joining networks or clubs outside your usual professional sphere or interests, for example. Volunteering is also a great way to do this.

Attitude to feedback and failure

Two other crucial aspects of growth mindset have a profound impact on learning:

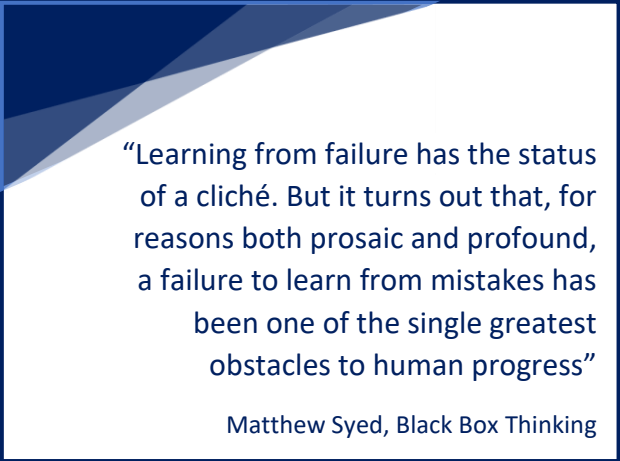
1) Attitude to Feedback, where we are willing to seek and embrace feedback – negative and positive – viewing it as vital to learning and improving.

2) Attitude to Failure, where we are optimistic about undertaking new challenges, knowing we might not succeed but that we will learn from any mistakes and setbacks.

Adopting a positive attitude to all kinds of feedback and to failure will have a major impact on individual and organisational learning.

If an organisation can encourage its employees to take more risks, they will be exposed to more challenges and situations that can be learned from. This approach can provide a source of new ideas and help ensure that the organisation is agile enough to react to changing circumstances. It’s important to mention that in an organisational setting this is about taking *calculated* risks.

Essential to this is psychological safety, providing an environment where people are not unfairly blamed, criticised or humiliated for having a go, for speaking up, or for suggesting new ideas.



“Learning from failure has the status of a cliché. But it turns out that, for reasons both prosaic and profound, a failure to learn from mistakes has been one of the single greatest obstacles to human progress”

Matthew Syed, *Black Box Thinking*

Suggested practices for leaders:

- Actively seek tough feedback – remember that it’s not personal and there is always something to learn or improve.
- Develop the habit of reflecting on any setback or mistake and identifying the learnings
- Regularly discuss challenges, problems and near misses - this will help destigmatise them
- Hold ‘Mess-Up’ meetings for people to review, in a non-judgemental forum, things that have gone wrong or not as well as hoped
- Make a point of rewarding individuals and teams when they identify and share learnings from problems or from disappointing outcomes.

Conclusion

Learning lies at the heart of a growth mindset, providing the key to improvement and growth and unlocking individual potential. For organisations, it drives continuous improvement, innovation and long-term success. To cultivate a learning mindset and culture, leaders must nurture and demonstrate their own growth mindset beliefs and behaviours. They must also put in place processes, practices and techniques to encourage the wider organisation to learn, to overcome any limiting beliefs, and to achieve high levels of performance to drive ongoing success.

References

- 1 - <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/HumanCapital/gx-cons-hc-learning-solutions-placemat.pdf>
- 2 - <https://www.gottman.com/blog/category/column/the-four-horsemen/>

Matthew Syed Consulting

Matthew Syed Consulting works with an impressive portfolio of global clients in the public and private sectors. Building on the work of best-selling author and influential thought-leader Matthew Syed, we establish thriving growth mindset cultures that drive higher performance in individuals, teams and organisations. Through a synthesis of leading psychological research and industry best-practice, we have developed a framework of proven tools and innovative strategies that empower organisational development and accelerate business outcomes.

To find out more or to have an informal conversation about leadership development or building growth mindset, email team@matthewsyed.co.uk.