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Unboxed

# If You're Open to Growth, You Tend to Grow

By JANET RAE-DUPREE

WHY do some people reach their creative potential in business while other equally talented peers don't?

After three decades of painstaking research, the Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck believes that the answer to the puzzle lies in how people think about intelligence and talent. Those who believe they were born with all the smarts and gifts they're ever going to have approach life with what she calls a "fixed mind-set." Those who believe that their own abilities can expand over time, however, live with a "growth mind-set."

Guess which ones prove to be most innovative over time.

"Society is obsessed with the idea of talent and genius and people who are 'naturals' with innate ability," says Ms. Dweck, who is known for research that crosses the boundaries of personal, social and developmental psychology.

"People who believe in the power of talent tend not to fulfill their potential because they're so concerned with looking smart and not making mistakes. But people who believe that talent can be developed are the ones who really push, stretch, confront their own mistakes and learn from them."

In this case, nurture wins out over nature just about every time.

While some managers apply these principles every day, too many others instead believe that hiring the best and the brightest from top-flight schools guarantees corporate success.

The problem is that, having been identified as geniuses, the anointed become fearful of falling from grace. "It's hard to move forward creatively and especially to foster teamwork if each person is trying to look like the biggest star in the constellation," Ms. Dweck says.

In her 2006 book, "Mindset: The New Psychology of Success," she shows how adopting either a fixed or growth attitude toward talent can profoundly affect all aspects of a person's life, from parenting and romantic relationships to success at school and on the job.

She attributes the success of several high-profile chief executives to their growth mind-set, citing an ability to energize a work force. These include [John F. Welch Jr.](#) of [General Electric](#), who valued teamwork over individual genius; [Louis V. Gerstner Jr.](#) of [I.B.M.](#), who dedicated his book about I.B.M.'s turnaround to “the thousands of I.B.M.'ers who never gave up on their company”; and [Anne M. Mulcahy](#) of [Xerox](#), who focused on morale and development of her people even as she implemented painful cuts.

But Ms. Dweck does not suggest that recruiters ignore innate talent. Instead, she suggests looking for both talent and a growth mind-set in prospective hires — people with a passion for learning who thrive on challenge and change.

After reading her book, Scott Forstall, senior vice president of Apple in charge of [iPhone](#) software, contacted Ms. Dweck to talk about his experience putting together the iPhone development team. Mr. Forstall told her that he identified a number of superstars within various departments at Apple and asked them in for a chat.

At the beginning of each interview, he warned the recruit that he couldn't reveal details of the project he was working on. But he promised the opportunity, Ms. Dweck says, “to make mistakes and struggle, but eventually we may do something that we'll remember the rest of our lives.”

Only people who immediately jumped at the challenge ended up on the team. “It was his intuition that he wanted people who valued stretching themselves over being king of their particular hill,” she says.

People with a growth mind-set tend to demonstrate the kind of perseverance and resilience required to convert life's setbacks into future successes. That ability to learn from experience was cited as the No. 1 ingredient for creative achievement in a poll of 143 creativity researchers cited in “Handbook of Creativity” in 1999.

Which leads one to ask: Is it possible to shift from a fixed mind-set to a growth mind-set?

Absolutely, according to Ms. Dweck. But, “it's not easy to just let go of something that has felt like your self for many years,” she writes. Still, she says, “nothing is better than seeing people find their way to things they value.”

Janet Rae-Dupree writes about science and emerging technology in Silicon Valley.

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