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Why mindset counts

Did you know that Darwin and Tolstoy were considered ordinary children? That the great golfer Ben Hogan was completely uncoordinated and graceless as a child? And it's said that Jackson Pollock had little innate talent for art, yet he became one of the greatest American painters of the 20th century and revolutionised modern art.

Perhaps there is more to people's talent than first meets the eye. Carol Dweck, a psychologist at Stanford, conducted studies with more than 400 year-five students. Her research team gave each student a set of problems, which they did pretty well on, and then praised them. One group was praised for their ability and intelligence: "You must be very smart at this." Other students were praised for their effort: "You must have worked really hard."

Both groups were exactly equal in terms of intelligence to begin with. However, right after the praise they began to differ. Those students praised for their ability rejected challenging new tasks that they could learn from. They didn't want to do anything that could expose their flaws or call into question their talent. They didn't want to 'look stupid'. They saw mistakes as a sign of personal failure or stupidity, were easily discouraged, and lost interest in the difficult problems. This group performed 20 per cent more poorly on subsequent tasks after they encountered failure.

The children in the effort group, however, chose more difficult tests and worked harder at figuring out puzzles. They were prepared to challenge themselves, even if it meant failing at first. They wanted to understand their mistakes, learn from errors and figure out how to do better. They enjoyed the challenge and performed 30 per cent better on subsequent tasks after experiencing failure.

Perhaps the most interesting finding is that when both groups of students were asked to write down the scores they received on the

problems, almost 40 per cent of the ability-praised students lied about their scores by overstating them.

Dweck demonstrated that mindset is what matters – more than ability, intelligence or IQ levels. She defines two types of mindsets: fixed mindsets – people who believe ability, talent and potential are fixed; and growth mindsets – people who believe you can substantially change how intelligent you are.

In organisations, fixed mindset managers may be inclined to believe effort is a bad thing. It means you're not talented or smart because if you were, you wouldn't need effort. They may label people as winners or losers then treat them accordingly, despite any evidence to the contrary. Open and productive discussions might be discouraged and dissent punished. Fixed mindset individuals become anxious about disapproval for their ideas, so open, productive discussion is suppressed, often leading to conformity in thought and acceptance of majority opinions.

Growth mindset managers, however, may be more likely to foster a team where honest opinions and open expression of disagreements are encouraged and critical thinking is fostered. The team environment would be

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one where problems are discussed, calculated risks are encouraged and support is provided to learn from mistakes and where people work together to improve their decisions.

Dweck found that teams headed by growth-mindset managers are ultimately more productive. These findings challenge HR paradigms. Systems and processes for developing talent are based on underlying assumptions about people and motivation. The messages we send individuals and the kind of praise we give will reinforce certain behaviours and inculcate a particular culture around what it means to get ahead.

WHERE HR COMES IN

How would we design HR initiatives if we worked in a firm with growth mindset and culture? Rather than automatically selecting the smartest graduates, we might probe further with insightful interview questions to identify their mindset such as "When did you struggle through and learn something new?" or "When did you experience a setback or made a mistake and how did you handle this situation?" Perhaps these firms might make room for graduates who may have returned to study after a break, with more tenacity and wisdom.

Perhaps we would redefine onboarding strategies and high-potential programs. How would it be if we selected participants around their mindsets rather than in terms of technical talents, then expose them to projects with a higher risk of failure and assess how they cope and how they learn from the experience? Could this approach develop greater management depth? And what would performance feedback look like in a growth-mindset organisation?

Perhaps instead of only rewarding smart ideas or performance, it could also include praise for taking the initiative, struggling through a difficult task, searching for strategies and keeping at it, trying all kinds of solutions and finally mastering the problem. **HRm**