

# The growth mindset: Four ingredients for creating a high-performance culture

By [Douglas Kruger](#)

6 Jul 2017

In *They're your rules, break them!*, I bring together the latest research on what makes human talent tick.

One of the most simple, yet incredibly important points comes from Carol Dweck, whose extensive research found that the single most important determinant in nurturing talent is the belief system of leaders: Specifically, do they believe in a fixed mindset, or a growth mindset?



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If our leaders buy into a worldview that supports a fixed mindset, which is the notion that our potential is genetically limited, they can actually prevent our people from ever growing. Their belief becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. But when they buy into a growth mindset, which is the one that says potential is malleable (also the view supported by science), they open up all new vistas of possibility.



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The debate around the limitations of human talent and ability is as old as our species. We started off believing that the gods bestowed some of us with greatness and others not, and if the gods said you should be king, then the mindless masses must simply fall into line beneath you. So let it be written, so let it be done! We moved through Darwinism, which argued that genetic potential was limited, all the way to today's research, which is showing that genetic potential is much less set and rigid than we ever believed. Essentially, yes, you come pre-loaded with a certain genetic formula. But that formula is adaptive, and therefore quite capable of stretching itself beyond its own early parameters. As it's nourished, it becomes ever more capable.

Human talent genuinely can be grown in dramatic ways, if we only know how.

In order to create a high-performance culture, in which the skills and talents of our people are continually being stretched and expanded by design, we require leadership teams who understand that potential is nurtured, not merely predetermined.



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There are many practical ways in which to perpetuate this culture of active talent-development. Here are some of the most simple and profound:

## 1. Inspire first

Studies on talent repeatedly show that the first component in human learning is the quality of 'yearning'. This operates on a very emotional level. People have to see something or someone they admire and yearn to be that way, before they will become deeply involved in the process of self-improvement. Therefore, it matters greatly to appeal to imagination and ego before we attempt to insert knowledge. We need to show them how great they can be, based on the greatness of someone they want to emulate, before we give them the information by which to achieve greatness.



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Think of this in the most simple, emotionally visceral terms possible. Picture a small boy seeing a soldier in a movie, then running outside to play that role. That's how humans tick: *Show me something I want to be. Start by igniting me.*

## 2. Coach often

Personal coaching is among the most effective forms of talent-development, way outstripping what an individual can achieve simply by reading information for themselves. Foster a culture of coaching within your organisation, in which the highest performers are constantly presenting on the lessons they learned on the way up, and on what they are doing right, thus helping others to raise their game. Interestingly, this, too, plays to the first idea. The more underlings see these successes and hear their stories, the more they will want to emulate them.

## 3. Praise effort, not status

If you praise a person for being intelligent, you inadvertently create a scenario in which they are terrified of disproving this finding. So they will tend to take on fewer challenges, and push themselves less, for fear of dislodging their own perceived

position as a clever person. Conversely, when you praise a person for how hard they are willing to try, how far-reaching their goals are, and how gutsy and bold their initiatives are, they will continue to try to reach and to stretch. So we should praise effort, not intelligence. Praise willingness to continually stretch, and not a set characteristic.

## 4. Display a learning culture from the top down

Some of the most inspiring leaders in the business world, and certainly many of the most inspiring speakers, actually show a little vulnerability. They are the ones who don't pretend to have all the answers. They call their people together and share new insights, new learnings and new ideas, as though they were all on a learning journey together. They are even able to show their human side, telling stories about mistakes they made and what they learned to do better as a result.

Stories of failure and overcoming are infinitely more inspiring to staff than false portrayals of perfection. I know this as a professional speaker: it's not success that inspires. The real value lies in 'tears shed prior'. Portrayals of perfection create a rigid sense that mistakes are unacceptable, which in turn makes learning and stretching unacceptable, as they are typically fraught with failure and uncertainty.

Can you be a strong enough leader to show vulnerability, fallibility and your own personal desire to grow? Can you encourage your leaders to believe – genuinely believe – that their staff are not limited in their potential, but rather, are capable of growth? Are you willing to institutionalise the steps above, in order to help your organisation avoid becoming reliant on rules for everything, and instead, create a learning organisation, that is ever-growing organically?



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If so, you have in your hands the making of an agile organisation. And perhaps most wonderfully, you sow the seeds of a collective intelligence that can operate, and improve itself, even without you.

## ABOUT DOUGLAS KRUGER

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