



Why Motivation and Mindset Matter

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 431

Celisa Steele: [00:00:00] Through thoughtful design and delivery, learning businesses have the ability and opportunity to influence the motivation and mindset of the learners they serve.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:13] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:14] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:23] Learning, of course, is a big part of our focus here on the Leading Learning Podcast, and today, in episode 431, we want to focus on motivation and mindset, which we view as two of the baseline requirements for effective, lasting, and enjoyable learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:41] We've talked about motivation and mindset before, but part of what we want to do today is compare and contrast these related but different concepts and talk about how each impacts learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:54] Both motivation and mindset are integral to creating and sustaining learner engagement.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:00] And both mindset and motivation are central to the success of learning businesses because they directly impact learner outcomes and learner satisfaction. So let's jump in and start with some definitions that will help us set up for comparing and then contrasting motivation and mindset.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:20] Let's start with motivation. Motivation really is about why someone is engaging in a learning experience. There are two types of motivation, to speak in very broad terms. There's intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation, sometimes called internal motivation and external motivation.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:01:42] Of course, motivation is key for getting learners to engage deeply and consistently over time, and it's often instrumental in getting them to the learning in the first place.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:54] Right. To say a little bit more about intrinsic and extrinsic, intrinsic is about that learner's own reasons for engaging in learning, their own internal satisfaction or their own reasons or desire to learn something. Extrinsic motivation is signaled by rewards or pressure. You have to take this training to comply with such and such—there's that stick approach. Or it could even be more of a carrot—if you take this training, then you'll get a raise next month or whatever it is. But, again, extrinsic and intrinsic. The thinking and the research out there is that intrinsic motivation is stronger and that extrinsic motivation, while it can work, if it's not applied consistently, then the learner can fall off, and it can actually erode intrinsic motivation. For motivation, we really want to be thinking about intrinsic. Why does the learner care about it?

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:57] Right. That's the motivation side of the equation, and then there's the mindset side of the equation. We're obviously putting them together in this podcast, but I think they can often get lumped together in a way that people don't tease them apart like we want to today. When we're talking about mindset—if motivation is about the *why* of learning, the reason, what drives the learner to participate and continue to participate in learning—mindset is more about the beliefs that the learner has about learning and *how* they're going to approach or potentially not approach learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:36] Just as we had two flavors of motivation that we talked about—*intrinsic* and *extrinsic*—with mindset we also have two flavors to talk about: *growth mindset* and *fixed mindset*. These are terms that were popularized by Carol Dweck. With *growth mindset*, someone with *growth mindset* believes that abilities can be developed and that those abilities are developed through things like effort, practice, and feedback. Someone with a *fixed mindset* believes that abilities are innate and unchangeable. So someone with a *growth mindset* is going to think, "Okay, if I practice enough, if I apply myself, I'm going to be able to learn how to do X," whereas someone with a *fixed mindset* might think, "I don't know how to do X now; I'm never going to know how to do X."

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:24] This whole idea of mindset, as Dweck has defined it, has become really pervasive in the educational world. In adult education, certainly in K-12 and in higher education, mindset is a very big thing. You hear elementary school teachers, principals, administrators talk a lot about mindset and grit—two terms that have become embedded there.

I think it's easy to take it for granted that there is this fixed mindset, there is this growth mindset. But, of course, as with any good theory, there's been at least a little bit of pushback around Dweck, and there may be some instances where mindset is a more useful concept than others.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:05] There's been some meta-analyses of studies on the mindset, and some of those have called into question how big an impact does mindset really have on learning? I would say that, from our reading of the literature and those meta-analyses, mindset does have an impact on learning, but it almost certainly has a larger impact in certain situations. For example, if you think about learners who are struggling, they're going to benefit more from having that growth mindset and thinking, "Okay, maybe this struggle is part of my journey to being able to learn how to do this thing." If you have a high-performing student—if we use the K-12 example, that straight-A student—flipping her mindset may not make that big of a difference because she's not really feeling a struggle anyway, and so it doesn't necessarily change things. So there's a little bit of variability, of course, in what impact mindset can have. But I do think that the studies and the literature that's out there do support the fact that having a growth mindset can contribute to increased learning, at least for certain populations.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:17] You can tell by the way we've set up this discussion and titled the podcast we believe both of these are important—mindset and motivation—being aware of each of them as a learner, being aware of each of them as a learning business, trying to connect with and support learners. Both are very important, but, again, they are different; they have different ways in which they apply, different ways in which they're going to impact learning. Maybe we can talk a little bit more about the differentiation between them—what mindset might look like versus what motivation might look like in particular circumstances.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:51] I think you alluded to this near the top of our conversation, Jeff. Motivation really is about what gets the learner started and then keeps the learner going, and it's tied to the why. Why learn? What matters? What do you think you're going to get out of that experience? Why do it in the first place?

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:10] That classic "what's in it for me?" Motivation is at the root of the WIIFM acronym.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:16] Mindset, as you also mentioned, is really about how a learner approaches the learning process. What kind of attitude do they bring to the learning experience? Mindset becomes really important when you think about challenges and difficulty.

Because, if someone has that growth mindset, then they're going to tend to respond better to obstacles, to see that as a natural part of the learning process, and to persevere. Whereas, if they have the fixed mindset, and they hit that challenge, it might be like, "Okay, I tried. Not for me."

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:48] You might think about the case of, say, an athlete. We've had the Olympics recently. Certainly, to get to the Olympics and compete in the Olympics, an athlete has to have a lot of motivation. You have to have the energy and endurance to get out on the field and to stay engaged and drive ahead with things. But I think also, particularly if you're going to make it to the Olympics, you have to have a belief about your ability to grow, change, and improve. That's going to make you believe you can get there in the first place and then handle the challenges that are always going to arise along the way in your training and when you're actually competing.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:23] Right. If we take that athlete example, where we have motivation as the athlete's energy, the athlete's endurance, we have mindset as the athlete's strategy, the athlete's ability to change how they're doing something in the moment in response to, say, an opponent or in response to whatever specific circumstances they're competing in. You can imagine a case where an athlete has one but not the other. An athlete with high motivation but a poor mindset could have all the energy in the world, but they're going to struggle when they start to lose. They're going to start to believe, "Oh, there's no way I can win this." On the other hand, you could have an athlete with a great strategy. They really do have that growth mindset. But, if they don't have the physical endurance, if they don't have the physical energy—this is motivation in our analogy here—then they're not going to get very far either. In our minds, both motivation and mindset are very important for success in the long run, success of the learner, success of the athlete in our analogy here.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:22] And obviously interrelated. Because, if you hit those challenges, and you don't believe you can get past those challenges, it's going to damage your motivation, which then is going to damage your ability to believe that you can then get back up and go forward from there.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:33] We can double down on our analogies here, maybe take one more comparison that might help tease out this motivation mindset difference. You can take the example of a car trip and think about motivation as the fuel that powers the car. Without that fuel, the car is not going to start. Without that motivation, the learning won't begin.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:56] You could say that mindset is like the GPS that guides the car through the journey. It's going to shape how you navigate the path ahead. With a growth mindset, a GPS is set to "find alternate routes." If you're faced with a roadblock, it's going to reroute you, showing you how you can keep going despite whatever that challenge or that roadblock is.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:16] And the fixed mindset might be like you just have that paper map, and it only knows that one way to get you there. If you hit that roadblock, that literal roadblock, you don't know how to get around it. Motivation (fuel) keeps you going, but, without the right mindset (without that good GPS), you may struggle to reach the destination or to deal with the obstacles along the way.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:39] The best scenario—we can borrow from our analogy here—the best learning journey occurs when you have a full tank of intrinsic motivation. You are internally motivated to pursue whatever learning you're trying to pursue. And then a GPS that's set to a growth mindset, that means you're both energized and adaptive, open to meeting those challenges and the changes that you're going to need to make to address those challenges.

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Celisa Steele: [00:11:48] We've talked about motivation and mindset, how they're both important to learning, but they serve slightly different roles in the context of learning. Let's talk a little bit more about the role of motivation in learning, and then we'll talk a little bit more about the role of mindset in learning. When we're talking about motivation in learning, a lot of the research that we have to draw on comes from self-determination theory.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:17] Right. As that name suggests, the ability for adults to determine their own trajectory in the world and their own trajectory in life. Mainly associated with Richard Ryan and Edward Deci. They did a lot of the foundational work in this, and they broke self-determination down into three components that definitely play a role in learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:39] Those three components are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy, in the case of learning, speaks to the learner's need to feel a sense of choice. That can play out in various ways. One perhaps obvious way is for the learners to be able to choose their own path, to be able to choose the right offering from your catalog or, even within the context of an online course, for example, be able to choose the path that they follow based on their interests or their needs in the moment.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:17] A second component is competence. In many ways, this is a bridge between motivation and mindset in my mind because this is the idea that learners need to feel that they can achieve success, that they've got the ability to be able to achieve success.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:34] And then the third part is relatedness. The idea here is that connection to others enhances motivation. In terms of learning, we can see clear applications around peer learning; we can see clear applications around mentoring—anything that gets that learner connected to others so that they feel like they have other resources to reach out to, so that they have others who they believe are in the same position, that they are struggling with the same issues. That sense of relatedness that comes from that can be very important to motivation.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:08] Let's ground this in the real world a little bit with some examples. There is some evidence that learning solutions that support autonomy—that do things like, for example, offer flexible learning paths—those types of solutions do in fact see higher learner engagement.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:24] Yes, we'll include a couple links in the show notes if you're interested in checking out a couple of articles. But one comes from Deci and Ryan themselves, and they were looking at that notion of environments and how environments, learning environments can support autonomy and how that can then enhance the intrinsic motivation. When learners have greater control over their learning, then they do feel that greater sense of autonomy. They feel that greater sense of intrinsic motivation, which helps them stay engaged. There's an article—"Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being" from the *American Psychologist* that we can cite. That was from 2000.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:11] Another study is from 2015 and looks more at the context of online learning specifically and the use of flexible learning paths and how that led to improved learner engagement and improved learner satisfaction. We're not going to go into deep depth on these studies, but we want to say that there is research out there that does support this assertion that, when you provide learners with more autonomy, when you allow them to determine more about the learning experience, they do tend to have higher levels of engagement and

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motivation, and these are the kinds of things that you can be thinking about when you're designing and developing what goes into your learning business's portfolio and thinking, "What can we do to increase the learner's ability to make choices?"

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:59] Yes, I think having self-determination theory broken down in this way...because it really is about how adults are going to be motivated to engage with the world. And so, if you're thinking, "How are we providing autonomy in what we're offering? How are we helping to support that sense of competence for our learners? How are we helping to establish that sense of connection to others, that relatedness?," when you break it down into these terms, it becomes easier to analyze and diagnose your learning portfolio and see where you're doing this well and where you're not doing it well.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:32] And these don't have to be high-tech solutions. Perhaps if you're talking e-learning, and you're thinking branching scenarios, where they get to determine...that might sound more complex. But you can think too in the context of a Webinar, where you're offering multiple reflection questions so that, if nothing else, the learner gets to choose which of the three that you're offering to spend time reflecting on. Or that you're providing that opportunity to turn and do a peer share in the context of that seminar. There can be some very simple solutions to these.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:04] Even simple things like offering a beginning, an intermediate, and an advanced level in a particular topical area so that learners can choose what applies to them, that contributes to a sense of autonomy.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:15] Let's talk now a little bit more about the role of mindset in learning. We talked about growth and fixed mindset. Let's talk a little bit more about some of the advantages of the growth mindset. The main advantage is that learners with that growth mindset are much more likely to persist through difficulties. And, if you're teaching something that really represents a leap for that learner, odds are they are going to encounter a difficulty, and you want them to persist. You want them to be able to see that difficulty as desirable and something that's going to actually contribute to their learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:52] I was going to raise that whole idea of desirable difficulty. That's going to factor into pretty much all learning experiences to some level or another. You're not going to learn if you don't have some level of desirable difficulty there. And so somebody with a growth mindset, as you said, is going to be able to push through that because—again that bridge back

to motivation theory—they feel they're competent to do that, that if they trust the process, they are going to be able to get to that next level.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:17] People who embrace the growth mindset are also more likely to seek out feedback and then to also be receptive of what feedback they do receive and take action based on that. We know that feedback can be so critical for improvement. That again gets to this idea of competence. Often we need feedback to understand where we're deficient, where we're doing a good job, or where we're doing a great job. To help you get an accurate sense of your own competence, feedback is often one way to do that. If you have that growth mindset, you're going to be asking for that feedback. You're going to be open to the feedback that you get. You're going to be thinking about what modifications and changes you can do with the feedback that you get.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:58] Yes, this openness to seeking out feedback and seeking out feedback, this ability to persist through difficulties, these two factors are going to have a huge impact on your adaptability in fast-changing industries or the fast-changing times that we live in. To have this type of mindset is going to make you much more capable to roll with the changes.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:24] And then the fixed mindset—we've touched on this a little bit, but a little bit more about some of the dangers. The main danger there is that learners with a fixed mindset are going to avoid challenges; they're going to tend to fear failure, not see that as a sign of progress but as something to avoid, which means they're going to stay within their comfort zone rather than that zone of proximal development, where you're really trying to ratchet up your practice, your skill, or your knowledge in a particular area. You're trying to push yourself and move forward. If you have that fixed mindset, you're much more likely to stagnate, to stay in that place where you're comfortable, and you're going to try to avoid those challenges and not take on the challenges that can result in significant learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:07] I think it can lead to or contribute to this whole notion of learned helplessness—that you feel like you can't help yourself out of a situation because you are confined by this mindset. We were recently having an interesting discussion internally about learning styles. One of the real downsides of learning styles is, if you believe that you have to learn according to a certain style, in my mind that's a form or a permutation of a fixed mindset, and it can lead to that kind of learned helplessness. Learning styles have been roundly debunked. This is one of the reasons they need to be debunked.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:44] One of the takeaways is to think about what you can do to encourage growth mindset among your learners because, when you have learners with that growth mindset, that's going to increase that learner engagement, it's going to increase their satisfaction, and all of that's going to help drive better outcomes, not just for the learners but for your learning business as well. This is a good segue into talking a little bit more about some of the practical strategies that we can use, as learning businesses, to cultivate motivation and to cultivate that growth mindset.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:22] Let's start with fostering motivation. Within that, it's helpful to have that breakdown in your mind of those different components of motivation: autonomy, competency, and relatedness. Anything you can do to encourage autonomy by offering diverse and flexible learning formats and other ways that learners are able to make choices about what and how they learn.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:47] And then you can help with that sense of competence by setting some clear learning goals. That's going to help learners see a direction. It's going to help them see their achievement. It's going to help them see their progress.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:57] And then providing constructive feedback to boost competence and self-efficacy. This may also occur in the context of relatedness and connectedness, whether that's peer evaluation or expert evaluation, but the sense of being a learner situated with other learners and people who are there to support you and provide that feedback.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:16] When you think about promoting growth mindset, one of the biggest things you, your presenters, your facilitators can do is create an environment, create a culture where mistakes are seen as part of the learning process.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:33] Yes, because there is no learning without some level of failure, usually. You have to make some mistakes. You have to have those desirable difficulties that you encounter and try things and maybe not have them work out and then be able to recalibrate. We know that that's a huge part of what makes learning stick is when that happens. Making people feel comfortable, that is okay. That is, in fact, what needs to happen for learning to happen.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:59] One example of how you can do that or how a facilitator can do that is being careful about how you respond when a learner answers a question, for example. What you want to do is celebrate and emphasize their effort, their progress, their improvement. You don't want to just say, "Great answer!" or "You nailed it!" or something that speaks to this idea

of either you knew it or you didn't. You want to speak to something that shows, "Okay, wow, you did a great job reflecting," or "You did a good job synthesizing that reading," not just something that's like, "Oh, great, you read the reading, and you can memorize that fact." It's not either you knew it or you didn't; it's about, even if someone provides a partial answer or there're only aspects of what they say that are good, you want to praise that because, again, you're trying to emphasize where they have made progress, where they have put in effort, even if it's not 100 percent of the way where you want to get that learner ultimately.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:58] Yes, and that should be part of the stories that we share or the case studies that we provide, whether that's in the context of learning or, of course, even especially in our marketing of our learning because that's where we're going to help to communicate that idea of a culture where learning is valued, where that growth mindset is valued, where motivation is valued.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:18] You just mentioned marketing. In essence, a lot of what we're saying here boils down to messaging. You want to shift your messaging around learning so that you are encouraging that growth mindset. You are trying to tap into the learner's intrinsic motivation. I'm thinking here, Jeff, of the conversation you got to have with Robert Cialdini. There's this idea of pre-suasion. Let's try to pre-suade our learners around the growth mindset and around intrinsic motivation so that they're coming in primed to learn.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:48] Yes, there's a lot of education that can be done here, and I think it's incumbent upon learning businesses to do that, to make people familiar with these concepts, both consciously and unconsciously.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:59] There are some easy ways and some harder ways in which you can try to foster a growth mindset, in which you can cultivate intrinsic motivation or motivation in general, but be thinking about how you can help to leverage those so that you can help your learners get past burnout. If they have that fixed mindset, and they're like, "Oh, I'm never going to be good at this," and it feels like they're beating their head against the wall, you can help flip to the growth mindset, and they begin to feel like, "Oh, that effort I'm putting in is really a sign that I'm on the verge of learning something and making progress." I think one of the other things is to think about how you're talking about the benefits of learning with you and make sure you're not overemphasizing extrinsic motivators.

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:45] Yes because that can kill intrinsic motivation, or at least keep it from emerging to the level that it could in the first place. An emphasis on this will get you a

promotion, you'll earn more money, those are important; it's not that there's not a place for extrinsic rewards. Just don't overemphasize it. Sometimes we see this kind of thing happen with a lot in how gamification gets applied with things like digital badges, and it's just racking up badges for doing whatever you're doing, which is nice, but, if you're doing that at the expense of figuring out where the intrinsic motivation is and what's really going to keep people going, eventually they're going to be tired of those badges.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:23] Our main takeaway is that we would encourage you to think about how is your learning business fostering motivation? How is it fostering a growth mindset in the context of your learning programs? Can you do it better, or can you do it more often? Maybe you're doing it really well in certain contexts or certain products but not across your portfolio. Think about what you're doing. Can you do more? Can you do it more consistently?

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:48] And focus on incremental growth as well. Everything doesn't have to be a huge leap forward. Just consistently mark those points where learners have made progress, and make sure that that's communicated, that it's appreciated, and that, again, as you were saying earlier, that it goes back to the sense of culture that you're helping to create as a learning provider to the audience that you serve.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:13] If you want to look into these concepts more, we will recommend a handful of books. For more around mindset, we recommend Carol Dweck's book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*.

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:26] It's a classic. We also recommend *Why We Do What We Do*, which is Edward Deci with Richard Ryan. I think Deci primarily takes the lead on that, but it's a fairly slender volume that is great. It's really eye-opening around the whole area of motivation.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:42] And then *Make It Stick* is a book we return to often. It touches on both mindset and motivation as well as many other aspects of what goes into effective and lasting learning, so that's always a good one to revisit if you haven't revisited it recently.

Celisa Steele: [00:28:11] Motivation and mindset are essential for effective, lasting learning. Through thoughtful design and delivery, learning businesses have the ability and opportunity to influence the motivation and mindset of the learners they serve.

Jeff Cobb: [00:28:24] At leadinglearning.com/episode431, you'll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast. And if you haven't yet, please subscribe.

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Celisa Steele: [00:29:03] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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