



Redux: Maximizing Learning with Mindset

Leading Learning Podcast
Transcript for Episode 468

Celisa Steele: [00:00:03] If you want to grow the reach, revenue, and impact of your learning business, you're in the right place. I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:10] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:17] Both the concept of mindset and Carol Dweck's book titled *Mindset* continue to influence how we think about learning, leadership, and performance. This episode, number 468, is an encore airing of an episode from our archives in which Jeff and I dig into the distinction between fixed and growth mindsets, explore how those mindsets shape the ways adults approach challenge and change, and connect Dweck's research directly to the work of learning businesses.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:45] Originally released in May 2019, we think the conversation remains highly relevant as organizations deal with uncertainty, look to cultivate innovation, and work to foster the development of resilient, adaptive learners. We hope you enjoy this revisit to mindset—capital M and lowercase m.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:09] Jeff, here's a statement for you to consider: You can learn new things, but you can't really change how intelligent you are. Would you say you mostly agree or disagree with that statement?

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:21] I would have to mostly disagree with that statement. There are probably limits, but I also think that intelligence is much more malleable than we tend to appreciate or acknowledge—or maybe I'm just being hopeful about my own intelligence.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:37] Here's another statement: No matter what kind of person you are, you can always change substantially. Mostly agree or mostly disagree?

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:46] Now that one I emphatically agree with. You can definitely change the kind of person you are substantially, primarily through learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:55] Jeff, as you know, those statements appear in the book *Mindset*, published by Dr. Carol Dweck in 2007. And we're going to devote this episode to talking about mindset with a capital M (the book) and mindset little m (the idea).

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Jeff Cobb: [00:02:13] That's right. We thought, why not go with a question-and-answer format for the episode?

Celisa Steele: [00:02:18] Why not indeed?

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:20] The first question is simply what is mindset?

Celisa Steele: [00:02:25] Dweck's research and work have become well known in the dozen years since *Mindset* came out, so I'm guessing many listeners are familiar with the term mindset. And, even if it happens to be a new term, it's pretty self-explanatory. Mindset is the frame of mind, the perspective that we bring to anything we do or experience in life—whether that's something on the job, at home, something professionally, socially, intellectually.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:54] Listeners might also know that Dweck says there are two mindsets: the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. If you have a fixed mindset, you believe your qualities are carved in stone. A growth mindset, on the other hand, is founded on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:13] In other words, the growth mindset believes intelligence can be developed, and the fixed mindset believes intelligence is static. To talk a bit about how those mindsets play out, let's circle back to those statements that I asked about at the very beginning of the episode, Jeff. Dweck uses those statements as a way for individuals to self-assess their own mindset. That first statement, "You can learn new things, but you can't really change how intelligent you are," conforms to a fixed mindset.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:42] And the other statement, "No matter what kind of person you are, you can always change substantially," reflects a growth mindset. Now that we've covered what mindset is, let's move on to question number two. How does mindset relate to learning?

Celisa Steele: [00:04:00] Growth mindset ties directly to learning. Dweck herself writes, "The belief that cherished qualities can be developed creates a passion for learning." That is, if you believe you can change and always change substantially—and that your own efforts make that change possible—you're going to embrace the potential of learning. So it seems that those of us who work in learning businesses should, by default, embrace the growth mindset. And yet...

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:29] And yet that doesn't always happen. It's important to recognize that we bring different mindsets to different circumstances. Something I wrote about in *10 Ways to Be a Better Learner* and that I continually see in myself and in others is that we may have a growth mindset in many areas of our lives—maybe even most areas—and yet be stymied by a fixed mindset in others.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:51] I see that in myself and in others as well. And Dweck makes the point that, as individuals, we're usually not entirely of the fixed mindset or entirely of the growth mindset. I might have a growth mindset about my ability in a sport. I might think I can practice tennis, and I can get better. But I might have a fixed mindset about my ability with music. I might tell myself, "There's no way I can learn to play the violin at this point in my life."

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Jeff Cobb: [00:05:18] I think you can. Because one key to becoming a better learner is to ferret out those fixed mindset areas and, where appropriate, replace them with a growth mindset. It's common for both learning business professionals and learning businesses to feel, for example, that they have a growth mindset as relates to creating effective education. That's something they feel confident about—they can always improve there and do a good job at it. But then they feel that they have no abilities and no real capacity for growth when it comes to something like marketing, which is so essential for success as a learning business.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:54] Yes, and there's another variation of this kind of mixed mindset—we may have a fixed mindset about our own ability in some area but have a growth mindset for *others* in that area. Again, to use that violin example, I might think it's too late for me to take up the violin, but I might believe that my kids can learn any musical instrument they want as long as they put in the time and effort.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:18] Those of us working in learning businesses may judge our own abilities differently than those of the learners and customers that we serve. We might embrace, for example, the almost limitless possibilities of learning—that growth mindset—but then think that our learners are just never going to get it. They're not going to understand that concept and embrace that growth mindset. Vice versa—the learners can do anything if they'll engage with those learning experiences we're creating for them, but then, at the same time, we're thinking it's impossible to ramp up our learning business in new areas and to achieve the growth we'd like to with our learning business.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:54] As we're beginning to tease out here, mindset applies to (A) us as individuals (to ourselves), (B) to the learners that we serve, and (C) to our learning businesses as entities. We want to talk about each of those groups (A, B, and C), and so our next three questions are going to address each.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:17] How does mindset impact us personally?

Celisa Steele: [00:07:20] We've begun to address that mindset has huge ramifications because it's the backdrop for everything that we do. It's the backdrop for how we engage with others, for how we learn, for what we choose to learn.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:35] It's worth adding that the growth mindset does come with a kind of perseverance. Dweck writes, "The passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even, or especially, when it's not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset."

Celisa Steele: [00:07:51] I think that's critical. The two mindsets see challenge, risk, and effort very differently. The growth mindset embraces challenge and effort and sees failure as an opportunity to learn and to improve. The fixed mindset, on the other hand, sees challenge and effort as dangerous. If intelligence, social skills, or whatever ability is fixed, then working hard for something is a sign of inferiority. The logic of the fixed mindset is, if you're good at it, it should come naturally, effortlessly, immediately.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:08:26] Yes, the fixed mindset sees failure as forever. If you have a fixed mindset and you fail at something, then you're bad at that thing. It doesn't offer a whole lot of opportunities for recovering versus a much more generous viewpoint from the growth mindset that, if you fail, you just did that thing badly *that one time*. Of course, you're going to be able to bounce back. This view of setbacks is so important because we know that challenge and effort are important aspects of learning. They're fundamental to it. Think of the concept of effortful retrieval, for example.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:03] Yes. And effortful retrieval makes me think of the book *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:10] Yes, those authors mentioned Dweck more than once (dozens of times) throughout the book because they recognize how important mindset is to successful learning. In fact, we'll be sure to link to an episode we did with Peter C. Brown, who was one of the co-authors of *Make It Stick*. Definitely go check that out. But, in the meantime, let's move on to the fourth question, which is how does mindset impact the learners you serve?

Celisa Steele: [00:09:37] First and foremost, mindset impacts the learners we serve in the same way that it impacts us. That means mindset determines the attitude that learners bring to a learning experience. And the learner's mindset plays a huge part in how effective any learning experience can be.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:57] It's important to recognize that mindset is not going to be even across groups of learners we serve. Some learners will come with a growth mindset, but others are going to show up with a fixed mindset. This adds a dimension to the concept of prior knowledge that Malcolm Knowles pointed out so many years ago. Not only do learners come to our offerings with different levels of expertise and experience on the subject matter—that differing prior knowledge—but they also bring those different mindsets.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:30] Which adds another layer to teaching and makes it extra tricky. But the good news is that people can be put into a growth mindset, and doing that—putting your learners in the growth mindset—strikes me and probably you too, Jeff, as a potentially powerful tool for learning businesses. So let's talk a little bit about how we might put learners in a growth mindset.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:54] Definitely. Here are some pretty simple ideas. One is to tell learners, just say it to them, that whatever they're about to study *can* be learned. Emphasize that. And then also emphasize that the learning experience you're offering is going to give them the chance to learn it.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:12] A related approach, going slightly deeper, is to give the learners an article. Dweck ran tests where she gave research subjects a scientific article that describes people who didn't have natural ability but developed exceptional skills. Just reading that article was enough to put her research subjects into a growth mindset for at least a period of time. We can do something like that—give them an article to read. We can also put learners in the growth

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mindset through the messages that we send, like setting rules and norms that often happen at the beginning of an instructor-led or facilitated experience. You might have the instructor or facilitator stress that effort and contribution are what they're looking for from the learners and that they value effort and contribution above the learner being right or doing something quickly.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:07] Yes, that kind of upfront work reminds me of Robert Cialdini and what he and I talked about in terms of pre-suasion in the learning context. We had an episode with Bob a while back. We'll be sure to link to that. But we discussed that just putting a question like "Do you consider yourself a committed learner?" on a slide before the start of a conference session, so it's up in the room where people can see it as they're coming into the session, just doing that can pre-suade those people in the room to think of themselves as lifelong learners and better prime them for the learning experience that they're about to engage in, make them more receptive to it. You could further refine that slide to put those people in the room into a real growth mindset by basically borrowing Dweck's question and putting something up there like, "Do you believe, no matter what kind of person you are, that you can always change substantially?" You might want to put in parentheses "Yes!" or something like that to further prime them. But, in any case, it's a simple approach to getting people into that growth mindset in a learning experience.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:20] Those are great ways to prime and pre-suade. And then you have to make sure that you keep that growth mindset front and center as you head into the learning experience. One aspect of that is feedback, which is such a tricky area or can be a tricky area. One thing you need to do is make sure that, in the feedback, you stress and praise learners' effort and the process that they go through to do something versus judging the learners' talent or intelligence. You have to be careful about how you give that feedback and what you're stressing in the feedback. Now, I mentioned facilitators and instructors when I was giving an example earlier, but I want to note that these approaches could apply to asynchronous online courses too. You don't have to have a human delivering this growth mindset. Jeff, the example you gave of a slide, there's no human involved there. That's just up there. It could be easily having text and audio in an e-learning course, as long as what it's conveying is that growth mindset.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:28] A word of caution here. Just as we can put people in a growth mindset, we can also put them in a fixed mindset. So we do have to be careful. We need to make sure that those who are designing and delivering learning experiences know about the mindsets and understand what triggers them—something that you want to discuss particularly with your subject matter experts if you're using volunteer SMEs, for example, to deliver sessions. Make sure they understand this concept, and make sure they understand—they need to know—that labels can trigger the fixed mindset. Even positive labels can do this. Calling someone smart equates that person with their achievement or performance. To prompt a growth mindset, you want to label it a little bit differently. You want to praise effort or way of thinking, saying, "That

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was a smart way to think about that problem.” That’s very different from simply saying, “You’re smart.”

Celisa Steele: [00:15:25] On the label front, you said even positive labels can do negative work. Sometimes labels that seem innocuous or seem fact-based, Dweck points out that those can have a negative effect. She cites research that shows that just checking a box to indicate race or sex can trigger a stereotype in the learner’s mind and lower test scores. It’s important to think about whenever you’re asking someone to identify themselves, to label themselves, whenever you’re labeling them, that can have an impact on the learner—keep that in mind, and be sensitive to it. A lot of this can feed into bias. Jeff, you got to talk with Howard and Shilpa about bias, so we should link to that episode in the show notes as well.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:14] Howard Ross may cite the same research in his book *Everyday Bias*. Howard Ross and Shilpa Alimchandani—we had a great episode. It’s still one of the most popular ranking episodes. It’s been one of the most shared. Very powerful episode and connects into mindset in so many different ways.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:37] With that, we come to our penultimate question. How does mindset impact our learning businesses?

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:43] There is a very important way that mindset connects into learning businesses, connects into our Learning Business Maturity Model, because it directly impacts one of the domains in that model: capacity. How we perceive the capacity of our learning business and how we cultivate that capacity as leaders also connect into the leadership domain of the Learning Business Maturity Model because, as leaders, we have the ability to influence the mindset of those who follow us, so it’s going to influence capacity, and it’s going to influence our ability to cultivate capacity. It’s really, really critical.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:25] That point you made about impacting leadership—Dweck herself dedicates a chapter to “Business: Mindset and Leadership.” And probably no big surprise to listeners, Dweck finds that good leaders have a growth mindset usually and that the fixed mindset tends to be toxic. This is where you have those companies with the big-ego CEOs that tend to shut down feedback, ideas, and innovation from those who serve under them.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:52] Yes. We’ve done episodes on the Learning Business Maturity Model before and talked about these domains, capacity and leadership. We’ll be sure to link to those. But another danger of a fixed mindset in an organization is that it tends to encourage groupthink—that, of course, deprives the organization of the diversity of opinions and views that often yields insight into the market and also the ability to solve the problems or come up with the innovations that are going to take your learning business forward.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:31] You can self-assess at the organizational level. Just as we opened today’s episode with a couple of questions that help you gauge your own mindset, you can ask questions about your organization to get a feeling for the overall mindset there. You might ask,

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“How do you act towards others in your workplace? Do you believe that they can change? How do others act towards you? Do they believe that you can change?”

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:57] It’s incredibly important. So many times we come across organizations where there is a pervasive fixed mindset in many ways. There’s not the belief in the organization that they can achieve what they want to achieve as an organization. We may need to do a whole episode on this at some point, but it’s an issue of low organizational self-esteem because they’re stuck in that fixed mindset when they need to be tapping the growth mindset. Incredibly important. But, for now, let’s turn to our final question. What takeaways do we want to emphasize? And that might be a cheat question, but it’s one that allows us to start wrapping up.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:39] I’ll emphasize that the growth mindset doesn’t equal learning, and, by the same token, a fixed mindset doesn’t mean no learning. But a growth mindset does increase the odds that learning will happen, and a growth mindset increases the odds that that learning will stick.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:00] And I’ll emphasize that mindset impacts multiple levels of what we do, how we act as learning businesses. Embracing a growth mindset is good for our learners, obviously, so they’re going to get the impact out of the learning experience. It’s good for our learning businesses. We talked about that concept of capacity and impacting the capacity of the business. And then, for us as learning business professionals and especially in our work as leaders of learning, mindset is just so important.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:36] That wraps up this encore airing of our episode on mindset.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:40] In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode468, you’ll find a transcript and options for subscribing to the podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:47] If you enjoy the Leading Learning Podcast, please share this episode or another with a colleague or co-worker you feel would appreciate and get value from it.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:55] Thanks again—and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by Moarn]