



# Always Learning: The Mindset That Keeps Great Leaders Growing

Among all the criteria that separate the best leaders from the rest, a genuine growth mindset sits near the top of the list. It is the engine behind adaptability, sustained performance, and long-term leadership effectiveness.

This is part 2 of my leadership series detailing “The Five Traits that Separate the Best Leaders from the Rest” based on statistically significant research and my experience coaching hundreds of executives. It explores what a growth mindset really is, what it is not, and how leaders and organizations can cultivate the real thing rather than the buzzword version.

## What a growth mindset actually is

At its core, a growth mindset is the belief that capabilities can be developed through deliberate effort, sound strategies, and useful input from others. It stands in contrast to a fixed mindset — the belief that talent is largely innate, and that success is mainly about proving you have “it” rather than getting better over time.



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Leaders with a growth mindset tend to:

- Put more energy into learning than image management, especially when things get hard.
- Look at skills, knowledge, and even personality tendencies as works in progress, never set in stone.
- See challenges, stretch assignments, and critical feedback as raw material for growth rather than threats.

When entire companies operate with this orientation, employees report feeling more empowered and committed, and they experience more support for collaboration and innovation. In contrast, fixed-mindset cultures tend to generate more internal competition, politics, and even deception as people jostle for position in a perceived “talent race.”

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## Three common misconceptions leaders must avoid

The term “growth mindset” has become so popular that it is now widely misunderstood. Several distortions show up repeatedly in executive teams and HR frameworks and quietly undermine the value of the concept.

### Misconception 1: “I already have a growth mindset”

Many leaders equate growth mindset with being flexible, optimistic, or open-minded – and then quickly conclude, “I’ve always been that way.” That is what Carol Dweck and her colleagues call a “false growth mindset.”

In reality:

- Everyone is a mix of fixed and growth mindsets, and the mix shifts with context and experience.
- Most leaders can name situations where they are genuinely growth-oriented (e.g., learning a new market) and others where they become rigid and defensive (e.g., being challenged on their leadership style).
- No one has a “pure” growth mindset, and claiming one usually shuts down the very self-examination that fuels growth.



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The leaders who benefit most from this concept are not those who declare, “I’ve always had it,” but those who admit, “Here’s where my fixed mindset voice gets loud, and here’s what it costs me.”

## Misconception 2: “It’s all about effort”

Another common trap is reducing “growth mindset” to praising and rewarding effort alone. In both education and business, this shows up as an almost sentimental celebration of “trying hard,” even when the effort is misdirected or ineffective.

Unproductive effort is not virtuous; it is wasteful. Great leaders don’t simply ask, “Are we working hard?” They ask, “What are we learning, how is that changing what we do next, and is it leading to better results?”

## Misconception 3: “Just say it and it will happen”

A third distortion is the belief that putting “growth mindset” into a mission statement or values slide is enough. Lofty words about growth, innovation, and empowerment are meaningless if underlying systems and behaviors continue to reward risk-avoidance, internal competition, and heroic individualism.

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## Triggers: where fixed mindset shows up for leaders

Even leaders who fully embrace the idea of a growth mindset find that their behavior does not always follow. Fixed mindset “triggers” show up in predictable situations:

- Facing a highly visible challenge or stretch assignment.
- Receiving tough feedback, especially about leadership style or impact.
- Being outperformed by a peer or a rising star on the team.

In those moments, many leaders report feeling defensive, threatened, or eager to protect their track record. The internal monologue shifts from “What can I learn?” to “What will this say about *me*?”



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Leaders who do the work learn to:

- Recognize their fixed mindset persona when it shows up — its voice, stories, and habits.
- Pause long enough to move from reflexive self-protection toward curiosity.
- Reframe the situation as an opportunity to learn and upgrade skills or assumptions rather than as a referendum on their worth.

This is not a one-time mindset shift; it is ongoing self-management in the moments when stakes and emotions are high.

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## What a growth mindset looks like in executive behavior

For senior leaders, a growth mindset is not an abstract belief; it shows up in daily choices that everyone can see. A few concrete patterns differentiate growth-oriented executives from their more fixed mindset peers:

### How they respond to bad news

**Fixed:** Shoot the messenger, minimize the issue, or quickly assign blame.

**Growth:** Thank the messenger, explore root causes, and focus on what can be learned and changed to achieve improved performance.

### How they treat talent

**Fixed:** Protect “stars,” label people early, and quietly assume most others are capped.

**Growth:** See potential in more people, provide real development opportunities, and believe capabilities can be built.

### How they talk about failure

**Fixed:** Focus on blaming and frame failure as a personal indictment or a career-limiting event.

**Growth:** Normalize intelligent risk-taking and insist that teams extract insight before moving on rather than covering their asses.



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## How they give and receive feedback

**Fixed:** Avoid hard conversations, sugar-coat issues, or turn feedback into personal criticism that triggers shame and defensiveness.

**Growth:** Ask for candid input regularly; model how to receive it without armoring up; and give specific, forward-looking feedback that focuses on behaviors and choices, not identity. Feedback is treated as essential for learning and stronger performance over time. They do not avoid hard truths, but they deliver them with dignity and make it clear the goal is growth, not shame.

When leaders consistently act in growth mode, employees take more thoughtful risks, surface issues earlier, proactively recommend solutions, and invest more in developing themselves and others.

## Practical steps to build a real growth mindset

Developing a genuine growth mindset individually or organizationally is hard work, but the path is tangible. A few disciplined practices make a meaningful difference over time.

### For individual leaders:

#### Audit your triggers

- Identify specific situations where you become most defensive or image-conscious.
- Name the fixed mindset narrative you tell yourself in those moments (for example, “If I need help, I’m not CEO material”).

#### Design small experiments

- Choose one trigger and consciously behave one notch more growth-oriented next time it arises. For example, ask for one piece of candid feedback you would normally avoid, and sit with it before responding. Or test one alternative behavior and watch what happens.
- Debrief what you learned and how the outcome differed from your usual pattern.



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## Build a personal feedback practice

- Identify two or three trusted colleagues and explicitly ask them to help you grow. Give them permission to tell you when your defensiveness shows up, and practice responding with curiosity (“Say more about that...”) instead of justification.
- After tough conversations, circle back and ask, “How did that land?” or “What could I have done differently?” Over time, this repetition rewires your default response from self-protection to learning and growth. It also cultivates allies who will more proactively help you grow over time.

## Shift how you praise and recognize

- In conversations with your team, focus your praise on learning, adaptation, and improved judgment, not just outcomes or raw effort.
- Routinely ask, “What did we learn here that we wouldn’t have learned if everything had gone according to plan?”

### For organizations and executive teams

## Align systems with the story

- Review performance management, promotion, and reward processes for fixed mindset signals. For example, narrow “talent lists,” excessive emphasis on individual heroics, or public shaming of failed bets.
- Add explicit recognition for smart risk-taking, cross-functional collaboration, and development of others.

## Build developmental infrastructure

- Provide broad access to coaching, mentoring, and development experiences rather than concentrating most investment on a small elite group of high performers.
- Make learning visible: internal case studies, post-mortems, and story-telling around how people grew — not just what they achieved — and invest in practical training on how to give, receive, and request feedback in ways that move people and performance forward.



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## Model vulnerability at the top

- When senior leaders acknowledge mistakes, share what they are working on personally, and demonstrate they can change their minds in light of new evidence, which sends a powerful signal.
- That signal often does more to shape culture than any formal program or slogan.

A growth mindset does not mean believing “anyone can do anything” or lowering standards in the name of positivity. It means holding people — including yourself — to high standards while also believing those standards can be reached and exceeded through learning, discipline, and smart experimentation.

For leaders who want to build resilient organizations that adapt, innovate, and thrive amid disruption, this is not optional. It is foundational.



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## About the Author

Jude Rake is the founding principal of JDR Growth Partners, a consulting firm that helps family-owned businesses, boards, chief executives, and their leadership teams achieve improved results and sustainable growth. Before founding JDR, Jude served in multiple C-level roles including CEO for fifteen years. Jude is also the author of *The Bridge to Growth: How Servant Leaders Achieve Better Results and Why It Matters Now More Than Ever*. Find out more at [jdrgrowthpartners.com](http://jdrgrowthpartners.com) and [The Bridge to Growth](#).

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