



# A Mindset for Leadership

Creating the decisions that define leaders

March 2015

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## Summary

The Focus	The Research	The Impact
<p>All performance can be improved by making Wise Decisions.</p> <p>Wise Decision making is the right information plus the right behaviour combined with a growth mindset.</p> <p>A central element of leaders performing well is their ability to make wise decisions.</p>	<p>Over the last few years there have been some significant findings about how static and growth mindsets impact our behavior. Understandably, this leads to an examination of how mindsets impact the decisions of leaders. After further review, the static and growth mindsets of individuals (as defined by Prof. Carol Dweck), seem to form the starting point of any decision making process.</p>	<p>Jeff tells his story in a practical way. Three months after starting (with some trepidation) a larger more complex leadership role, he is less stressed and enjoying his work more than he expected. By increasing his personal ownership of his mindset and decisions he makes, he has started to value elements of his team's performance that he previously ignored.</p>

Demands on time combined with complex issues are the ingredients for most people to fall back to fast thinking or relying on "following their gut instincts". Unfortunately the process of fast thinking pushes managers to have static mindsets, restricting their analysis when thinking around change. We have found the more mindful leaders are of the mindset they hold; that being, the decisions they make and the impact they have on the people; the more likely they are to succeed in influencing others to make wise decisions.

Balancing the competing interests of the business and the various issues of the team, creates challenges for most managers. Whenever you see people willingly embrace change you often find they are being driven by a growth mindset. They are people that are prepared to continually put themselves into points of discomfort gathering new information and be prepared to make a mistake.

Effective leaders of change create situations that allow engagement and inspire people to adopt new ways of working. Leaders with a growth mindset are not perfect; they are however people who are prepared to allow others to have a role in the change process so they can learn from the experience.

Factors such as accountability, agility, speed, responsiveness, autonomy, collaboration, customer focused etc are all elements that go into defining a high performance culture. While each of these elements are different and require different actions, the common factor is that when they are achieved you will find leaders influencing and creating a collective growth mindset.

As managers will attest, leadership is not a rank, leadership is not a position; leadership is a decision: A decision to experience discomfort; a decision that allows others to feel safe; a decision to hold a growth mindset.

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## A Mindset for Leadership

Leadership is a decision. Experiencing discomfort so others can feel safe, thinking about the greater good, committing to a goal and influencing those you work with are examples of leadership decisions. Whenever you see a successful business, you know that people have been willing to make courageous decisions.

Most leadership models define the information leaders should be utilizing and the behaviours they need to display. The aim is usually to create a work environment that inspires employees to align with the organisational vision and push to achieve it.

The ideas of leadership are under constant analysis. There are numerous capabilities that define what constitutes leadership as well as a number of different views on leadership. There is, however, a common element throughout leadership models: The requirement for leaders to be wise decision makers. This paper will explore how the mindsets different leaders hold can influence their decision making. This in turn, impacts their performance as a leader.

### Personal Leadership – How static mindsets restrict performance

Over the last few years there have been some significant findings about how static and growth mindsets impact our behavior. Understandably, this leads to an examination of how mindsets impact the decisions of leaders. After further review, the static and growth mindsets of individuals (as defined by Prof. Carol Dweck), seem to form the starting point of any decision making process. Consequently, we have found that the more mindful leaders are of the mindset they hold; that being, the decisions they make and the impact they have on the people; the more likely they are to succeed in influencing others to make aligned decisions. However, through our work, we also have observed that many leaders hold greater static (or closed) mindsets rather than growth (or open) mindsets. By learning to challenge their perceptions of the world they operate in, leaders can experience tremendous personal and professional growth.

Many managers have reported that they are at their best when they follow their gut feeling. They feel in control and enjoy the clarity these decisions bring. Combining with this process is that they also feel that they are minimizing the opportunity for mistakes to be made. They believe that in order to make these decisions they have to make a number of assumptions and call on past experience, rather than gathering new information or talking with other stakeholders who may potentially reject the decision. They also report that these decisions often require people affected by their decisions to accept it and get on with the task at hand. Collaboration is not required in these situations as the static mindset of "I know best", often drives the decision-making process.

*The element that exists through all the models of leadership is the requirement for leaders to be wise decision makers.*

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### Trevor's Story

Trevor was tasked to improve the performance of his team and the service delivery they provided clients. He was struggling to make the changes he knew he had to make. Each time he got close to making a decision, he found himself doubting his judgment and seeking more information.

When Trevor explored his personal decision making approach in more depth, he was able to describe the process he had followed. He expressed confidence in his analysis of the data and was not able to explain why he had not chosen to make a decision to act. Trevor was able to identify his issue; he was using the static mindset of "I know best", which was underpinned by his perception that negative consequences could befall him and his team in making a mistake.

Trevor's brain responded to uncertainty about future changes, underpinned by a fear of being seen as a failure if Trevor's decisions were found to be wrong. When questioned further about his feelings around this fear, Trevor could not rationally explain his fear. He could not recall or identify any actions from his manager, colleagues or team members that would prompt this kind of reaction. In fact it was quite the opposite, his manager, colleagues and team had been supportive of his actions to date. Trevor was dealing with a internal deceptive message.

*The impact the deceptive message had on Trevor was to slow down decision-making. It also had a negative impact on his ability to collaborate with his peers.*

The impact of this deceptive message was to slow down Trevor's decision-making and action and his ability to collaborate with his peers. Trevor observed that when he thought about how he was reacting he was thinking negatively; he felt he had the wrong attitude. Following on the same line Trevor's attitude, or mindset, was based on win / lose thinking. In the above example he thought he would "lose" with his colleagues, team, and manager if he made the wrong decision, so he chose to postpone action by requesting more information. Trevor's static mindset had impacted him by inhibiting his decision making and performance; it impacted the team as collaboration was avoided; and customers were not consulted about planned actions.

The positive part of Trevor's story is, with a little assistance Trevor was able to identify the static mindset he had, review it's value, and then replace it with the growth mindset. What this meant was that he was able to look at the current situation through a mindset that focused on his effort to achieve and learn from each situation. When Trevor applied a growth mindset to his decision-making he was able to see that he had all the knowledge and talent he needed within his team to affect the needed changes

Trevor unknowingly focused on the prospect of losing, only focusing his efforts on avoiding failure. By applying a growth mindset he became focused on the effort of improving himself and others.

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He became focused on the effort needed to gain the outcome, rather than the outcome alone. The result of applying a growth mindset was a decision to act. Trevor stopped his procrastination, he backed the people in his team, and he actively engaged his customer to ensure he delivered the best outcome for all parties.

### **Growth mindset - Inspiring others to make a change**

A key function of a leader is to inspire individuals to make decisions to adopt needed business changes. The collective decision making of individuals enable organizations to be responsive to customers and meet shareholder expectations. A common challenge for managers is to keep people engaged while trying to change the business. Balancing the competing interests of the business and the various issues of the team, creates challenges for most managers. Demands on time combined with complex issues are the ingredients for most people to fall back to fast thinking or relying on "following their gut instincts".

Unfortunately the process of fast thinking, or following your gut instinct, only allows you to draw on what you already know. It pushes managers to have blinkered thinking around change, as the brain is not operating in a manner that allows it to react effectively to new information, or unknown situations. In these situations, leaders regularly encounter stress-based reactions, often holding onto a win / lose attitude, or static mindset that drives the aversion of failure in their decision-making. In our experience the side effect of this approach for managing change is that leaders tend to operate hierarchically, with a bias towards command and control, rather than inspiring and engaging others to contribute.

Whenever you see people willingly embrace change you often find they are being driven by a growth mindset. They are people that are prepared to continually put themselves into points of discomfort in order to involve others, gather new information and be prepared to make a mistake. Effective leaders of change create situations that allow engagement and inspire people to adopt new ways of working. As described in the following example of Max, leaders with a growth mindset are not perfect; they are however people who are prepared to allow others to have a role in the change process so they can learn from the experience.

*Whenever you see people willingly embrace change you most often find they are being driven by a growth mindset.*

### **Max's Story**

Max is a larger than life character – he is the guy you notice in the room. It is easy to assume that he is the natural leader of the group. He has a great capacity to hold a group's attention, deliver a message with passion and cut through the guff that can sometimes appear when managers present to their teams. He has managed to achieve things with teams that others have not. He has reconstructed cultures to take a greater focus on safety management and lifted performance where it has been underperforming for some time. If you were to ask him what his secret is, you will not get a textbook answer. Instead, you will get a few statements that all revolve around resilience, being fair, not being afraid to have a go or shy away from hard work.

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Upon closer examination of Max's approach to leading his teams, there are a couple of specific mindsets he adopts. The first mindset is "it is through mistakes that we learn". The second mindset is "once you start something you see it through to the end". When we spoke in more depth about both these mindsets he reflected that his managers had helped him get to where he was today, so he wanted to give that same opportunity to others.

These mindsets help define Max as a leader, and differentiate him from other managers. In a practical sense these mindsets applied over and over again to decisions have seen Max develop a high level of confidence in his decision-making. Some would say he is courageous; he just says he is dealing with reality, rather than jumping at shadows (perceptions). It has also meant that he has been prepared to delegate work to his team, support them to make decisions, and learn from their mistakes. Finally it has helped him focus on the things that matter, rather than focusing on everything.

Max will be the first person to tell you that he has many imperfections. He can sometimes have a short fuse, he can jump to conclusions, and can be stubborn. These assessments are all accurate. He has static mindsets that can evoke a fear of failure. As he says "failure is not an option".

*His focus on the growth mindset means he creates a work practice that helps his team members feel empowered to make decisions and take actions.*

Unlike some managers, Max is aware that these attributes are not strengths in his practice. These are stress triggered behaviours that are driven out of static mindsets. They create poor behaviour that reduces his personal productivity, and negatively influences those he works with.

His focus on the growth mindset means he creates a work practice that helps his team members feel empowered to make decisions and take actions. He creates environments that allow people to feel and experience discomfort, supporting them to come out the other end of the process realizing that things are not as bad as they seem. His approach helps others experience the value of the growth mindset. His use of the growth mindset influences others to do the same, enabling them to inspire change within themselves.

### **Growth mindsets encourage individual accountability and responsibility**

In many organisations, managers are grappling with the complex issue of improving performance. As part of this issue they are seeking to create a situation where employees are taking responsibility for their actions and accountability for the outcomes they achieve. The challenge many managers have in this situation is trying to understand why members of their team do not feel empowered.

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When we investigate the behaviours and decisions of the managers who report these issues, we often find that they regularly check and change their direct reports work or decisions. They will request to be copied on all emails. They will say, “Do what you want to do, just check with me before you make the decision”. Managers explain the reason for this behaviour is that they believe their teams lack capability and are concerned about the quality of the work provided by their employees. As such, they do not want to be seen to be providing sub-standard service.

### **Darryl's Story**

Darryl, a senior manager, was lamenting over the number of hours he spent having to rework his team's documents before providing them to the CEO. He could not understand why his team member's were not improving. He also could not understand why people were not taking the initiative. When we broke down his decision- making process, we discovered the static mindset that drove him was the fear of looking stupid in front of his peers. This mindset drove him to think that his way was the best way. It also meant that he created a busy work practice, where he had to approve every piece of work before it was sent; resulting in having no time to coach his team.

The static mindset Darryl held was driving his need to micro manage his team members. This micromanagement created stress for a number of his team members who developed a static mindset about applying effort to improving their work. Darryl's practices created a situation where team members said, “Why bother trying as he is only going to change it!” Leaders with this kind of static mindset can often find themselves micromanaging team members. Micromanaging can drive team members to hold a static mindset themselves, which can lead them to feel disempowered, lacking the desire to take responsibility for their work and accountability for their outcomes.

A defining attribute that differentiates leaders and everyone else is their ability to be honest with themselves and recognise how their mindsets are driving their decisions, and impacting their teams. Darryl was able to recognise how his static mindset, looking stupid in front of his peers, was driving his micromanaging behaviours and having an impact on the performance of his team. When he adopted a growth-oriented mindset, he found that he had a stronger focus on delegating work, he spent more time setting expectations and helping team members prepare to complete the task. He moved from “fixing problems” to “coaching solutions” creating a more agile, capable and motivated team.

*People with a growth mindset who embrace learning, value sharing and have a focus on the “greater good”, find it natural to collaborate with their peers.*

### **Collaboration is achieved when people have a growth mindset**

Collaboration is a process that enables a group of people to tap into their collective wisdom. It creates a dialogue that explores and evolves ideas, enabling a business to tap into the talent across the organisation. We find that collaboration is frequently spoken about in organisations but

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rarely implemented in practice. One of the key barriers we find to people collaborating is the prevalence of static mindsets held by key decision makers. When people think in a win / lose paradigm it is very difficult to effectively collaborate as it requires people to be open to their opinions and ideas not being accepted. On the other hand, people with a growth mindset who embrace learning, value sharing and have a focus on the “greater good”, find it natural to collaborate with their peers.

### **Nikki's Story**

Nikki is a senior manager recently appointed to her role. She was asked to describe the changes she has made in her leadership approach during the time she has been in the job. Nikki commented that her ability to network, share ideas and talk with others has been the most significant change. Prior to commencing in the role, Nikki identified a need to improve this area of her leadership. After confronting the static mindset she held about her ability to network (she perceived herself as introverted and not a good networker) she recreated the mindset. Her new mindset focused on the value of relationships and her commitment to leading by example. Using those two mindsets to drive her decision-making and behaviour, in a period of three months Nikki created strong relationships with her colleagues and is getting help from her colleagues on issues she previously avoided.

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Nikki's commitment to managing her fear of failure and embracing her growth mindset increased her ability to influence her peers, engage her managers and create a faster moving business. Nikki's reflection is that her static mindsets stopped her from expanding her capability, and as a result, curtailed her team's performance. By adopting her growth mindset she is sharing ideas, asking questions and involving more people. Her more collaborative approach is reducing her need to know everything, enabling her to focus more on coaching and supporting her team.

### **A leader is able to embrace discomfort, learning through adversity**

The brain is designed to warn us of dangers and prepares us to react to those dangers, keeping us out of harm's way. This process is excellent for us when we are bush walking along a trail and we come across a poisonous snake that is rearing up wanting to bite us. Without thinking, we react! Again it is great for us when we are crossing a road and a car does not stop at the lights. You notice this out of the corner of your eye, adjust your view, confirm the problem and without hesitation take evasive action and avoid being hit. This same process also kicks in when we are faced with completing a task at work that

we find difficult. We procrastinate, or we obstruct the process, go slowly, or argue against the idea. We resist moving to the perceived point of discomfort.

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Part of our brain is wired to protect us, so when it identifies discomfort it sends messages to move away from the perceived threat so we remain safe. In our daily lives, most of the perceived threats our brain picks up are not real problems. They do not pose the threats our brain is telling us, and as a result do not require us to resist the change we are confronted with.

### **Jeff's Story**

Jeff tells this story in a practical way. Three months after starting (with some trepidation) a larger more complex leadership role, Jeff states that he is less stressed and enjoying his work more than he expected. He explains further; by increasing his personal ownership of his mindset and decisions he makes, he has started to value elements of his team's performance that he previously ignored. By focusing on the growth mindset "that it is okay that we make mistakes, as they create learning experiences" he has been able to reshape his view of the challenges he faces in the new role.

By embracing the idea that as a leader his job is to embrace discomfort to help others, Jeff has created a new leadership example for his team. His approach has increased team collaboration and personal accountability for performance. He has reduced his impulse to micromanage his people and as a result they are taking an increased level of responsibility for their tasks.

As Jeff and the other managers that were noted in this paper will attest, leadership is not a rank, leadership is not a position, leadership is a decision: A decision to experience discomfort; a decision that allows others to feel safe; a decision to hold a growth mindset.

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