

In my 30 years in senior leadership across the globe, I've learned that high-performance leadership stands on just three foundational pillars:

1. **Strategic Vision:** Creating, communicating and executing a clear direction.
2. **High Emotional Intelligence (EQ):** The self-awareness and social management required to build connection.
3. **A Growth Mindset:** The belief that traits and abilities are developed, not fixed.

While all three are necessary, the first two can only be developed if the leader possesses the third - a **Growth Mindset**. It is the *a priori* condition for momentum. Without the belief that you—and your team—can grow and develop the needed leadership traits, your strategy is just a static document, and your EQ is a performance mask.

Beyond "Talent": The Science of Potential

Long before Carol Dweck popularized the term "Mindset" in 2006, the debate between **Entity Theory** (Fixed attributes) and **Incremental Theory** (Growth approach) was brewing in social psychology.

Early 20th-century pioneers like Alfred Binet—the inventor of the IQ test—actually intended his work to identify children who needed *more* help, not to label their permanent limits. He famously stated that with practice and method, we can become more intelligent than we were before. However, society eventually weaponized these tests to support a "Fixed" narrative: that IQ, and other qualities like willpower, and leadership are "Entity" traits you are simply born with.... or not.

It was **Professor Carol Dweck's** landmark research - reflected in her book "Mindset: The New Psychology of Success" - that finally broke this mold. By studying how individuals respond to failure, she demonstrated that talent and intelligence are

merely starting points. Her evidence showed that when we praise "effort" over "innate intelligence," we trigger the Prefrontal Cortex to engage in problem-solving rather than ego-protection.

The Neurochemistry of the "Entity" Trap: Why Your Brain Prefers a Fixed Mindset

While the Growth Mindset is the engine of leadership, we must acknowledge a hard truth: Your biology is working against you.. To the primitive brain, a Fixed Mindset isn't just a perspective—it's an energy-saving strategy.

1. The Basal Ganglia vs. The Prefrontal Cortex

The brain is an energy-conserving machine. Your Basal Ganglia—the ancient part of the brain responsible for habits—is incredibly fuel-efficient. It wants you to do what you've always done because it's "cheap" to run.

The Prefrontal Cortex (PFC)—the seat of your Strategic Vision and the center for complex change—is an energy hog. A Growth Mindset requires the "expensive" PFC to stay engaged to process new learning and analyze mistakes. A Fixed Mindset, by contrast, allows the brain to default to the "cheap" Basal Ganglia. If you believe your talent is an "Entity" that cannot change, your brain doesn't have to spend the glucose required to build new neural pathways.

2. The Amygdala Hijack of the Ego

In a Fixed Mindset, your skills and intelligence are tied directly to your identity. This creates a biological "Blast Radius" when things go wrong. When a "Fixed" leader receives critical feedback or faces a strategic failure, the brain doesn't see "data for growth"; it sees a mortal threat to the self.

This triggers an Amygdala Hijack. The brain perceives the ego-threat as a physical danger, flooding the system with cortisol and shutting down the Prefrontal Cortex to conserve energy for survival. This is why highly "talented" leaders often become defensive and reactive under stress—their brains have literally turned off their ability to think strategically in order to protect the "Entity" of their talent.

3. The Dopamine Trap of the "Natural"

We often praise "natural" talent, but biologically, this is a poison pill. Being labeled a "natural" leader or "genuinely brilliant" provides a massive dopamine hit to the

brain's reward system. However, once that identity is established, the brain becomes risk averse.

To maintain that dopamine-rich "Natural" status, the leader subconsciously stops taking risks. They stop experimenting because the struggle of learning something new feels like a demotion from "Expert" to "Amateur". They trade the Growth Mindset (which requires cognitive friction) for the Autopilot of Mediocrity.

For example, Dweck found that some children who were labeled as "smart" or "academically gifted" would often prefer simpler tests and challenges, so that those fixed labels - and therefore their identity - would be reinforced, rather than take on tougher challenges with a risk of failure and of their identity being diminished.

4. Neuroplasticity: The Momentum Mechanic

The good news is that the brain is not a static piece of hardware; it's a dynamic Operating System. Neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections—is the physical manifestation of a Growth Mindset.

When you intentionally lean into the "cognitive friction" of a hard task—like rewriting a strategy or having a difficult 1-on-1—you are forcing the PFC to stay online. Growth doesn't happen during the solution; it happens during the struggle. By treating leadership as a series of "reps" rather than a fixed trait, you move from the Passivity Loop of the "Natural" to the Momentum Loop of the Architect.

The Problem: The Organization as a "Fixed" Entity

Despite Dweck's work, and what we know about the neuroscience behind how positive a growth mindset is for individuals and companies, most modern organizations still operate from a **Fixed Mindset** perspective.

They focus on "finding" resilient people rather than building resilience. They treat "natural leaders" like rare artifacts. This creates an **Ego-Centric** culture where mistakes are hidden because failure is seen as a limit of "Entity" talent rather than a "Growth" data point.

Without a Growth Mindset, there is no personal mastery. If you believe your capacity is capped, you will never design the conditions for momentum because you believe the engine is as good as it's ever going to get.

The "Copy-Paste" Strategy for Change

However, the balance between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset is not binary. It's a continuum, and recent research into **Domain-Specific Mindsets** suggests an interesting breakthrough: you don't need to change your entire personality. You likely already have a Growth Mindset in *one* area of your life—usually a hobby or sport—while remaining "Fixed" at work.

You can essentially "copy and paste" these neural blueprints across contexts. To bridge this gap, follow these three steps:

1. **Audit Your Mindsets:** Identify where you already believe in growth (e.g., skiing, gardening, or a musical instrument). Contrast this with where you feel "stuck" (e.g., willpower, public speaking, or strategic thinking).
2. **Frame Narrow Contexts:** Don't try to change your entire professional identity at once. Pick one narrow "frame"—like your willpower around a specific behaviour—and apply your "Sports Mindset" to it. The "secret" is to cross-pollinate the beliefs from a "Growth" area into your work context. Focus on micro-dosing the behaviours; build momentum in the areas where you currently feel "stuck" through small, consistent wins.
3. **Rewrite the Protocol:** Literally write out the behaviours from your "Growth" context. For me, skiing was the key. In skiing, I defined success by how many times I fell and got back up. I championed failure over staying unscathed. I took that belief—that "failure is a rep"—and applied it to the challenges and opportunities in the office.

Give yourself the proper runway for this change. Research from a landmark study by Phillippa Lally at University College London found that it takes an average of 66 days for a new behaviour to become automatic.

While you may have a "lightbulb" moment where your mindset shifts almost instantly, the behavioural "rewiring" realistically takes a couple of months. Don't rely on your "Future Self" to stay disciplined. Use coaches, mentors, or any other accountability engine to push you through the wall that typically hits after the first week or two.

The Challenge: From Visionary to Architect

Momentum begins the moment you stop just trusting your "Future Self" to be better with no deliberate activity and instead start **Behavioural Engineering**.

If you are treating your leadership traits as fixed, you are acting as a **Controller**. You are relying on hierarchy because you don't believe the system can learn. To become an **Architect**, you must first accept that every friction point in your organization is an opportunity for a "rep" in growth.

Are you building an Operating System based on untapped potential, or are you just managing the limits of what you have?

If you want help engineering this balance without losing your company's soul—reach out. Let's build the OS that makes growth inevitable, not optional.