

What is Talent—and How Important Is It? What Lies Behind Great Achievement? What Stops People From Pursuing Their Dreams?

Benjamin Barber, an eminent sociologist, once said, “I don’t divide the world into the weak and the strong, or the successes and the failures... I divide the world into the learners and non-learners.”

What on earth would make someone a non-learner? Everyone is born with an intense drive to learn. Infants stretch their skills daily. Not just ordinary skills, but the most difficult tasks of a lifetime, like learning to walk and talk. They never decide it’s too hard or not worth the effort. Babies don’t worry about making mistakes or humiliating themselves. They walk, they fall, they get up. They just barge forward. What could put an end to this exuberant learning? The fixed mindset. As soon as children become able to evaluate themselves, some of them become afraid of challenges. They become afraid of not being smart. I have studied thousands of people from preschoolers on, and it is breathtaking how many people reject an opportunity to learn.

For twenty years, my research has shown that your mindset profoundly affects the way you lead your life. It can determine whether you become the person you want to be and whether you accomplish the things you value. How does this happen?

Believing that your qualities are carved in stone—the fixed mindset—creates the need for you to prove yourself over and over. You believe people are either born smart or not smart, they are born good at sports or not, that people were born with a good personality or a bad one. People with a fixed mindset always feel the need to prove themselves—in the classroom, in their careers, and in their relationships. Every situation is evaluated: *Will I succeed or fail? Will I look smart or dumb? Will I be accepted or rejected? Will I feel like a winner or a loser?*

Other people believe differently- they have a growth mindset. This mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can improve through effort. Although people may differ in their initial ability, talent, interests or personality, people who have a growth mindset believe everyone can change and grow through effort and practice. They believe that a person’s true potential is unknown, that it is impossible to foresee what someone can accomplish with practice, effort, and training.

People with a growth mindset- those who believe that their qualities can be developed-- have a passion for learning. Why waste time proving over and over how great you are, when you could be learning new things and getting better?

One seventh-grade girl I worked with summed it up. “I think intelligence is something you have to work for... it isn’t just given to you... Most kids, if they’re not sure of an answer, will not raise their hand to answer the question. But what I usually do is raise my hand, because if I’m wrong, then my mistake will be corrected. Or I will raise my hand and say, ‘How would this be solved?’ or ‘I don’t get this. Can you help me?’ Just by doing that I’m increasing my intelligence.

Excerpt from Dweck, Carol. Mindset: The New Psychology of Success

In the fixed mindset it's not enough just to succeed. It's not enough just to look smart and talented. You have to be pretty much flawless. And you have to be flawless right away... After all, you believe that if you have it you have it, and if you don't you don't...

And what happens when you don't succeed? If you believe that when you don't do well at something the first or second time it means you lack competence or potential—that you are a failure – where do you go from there? Do you just give up?

The Truth About Ability and Achievement

Try to picture Thomas Edison as vividly as you can. Think about where he is and what he's doing. Is he alone? I asked people and they always said things like this:

“He’s in New Jersey. He’s standing in a white coat in a lab-type room. He’s leaning over a light bulb. Suddenly, it works! [Is he alone?] Yes. He’s kind of a reclusive guy who likes to tinker on his own.”

In truth, the record shows quite a different fellow, working in quite a different way.

Edison was not a loner. For the invention of the light bulb, he had 30 assistants, including well-trained scientists, often working around the clock in a corporate funded state-of-the-art laboratory!

Edison did not invent the light bulb in one try. It did not happen suddenly. The light bulb has become the symbol for that single moment when a brilliant solution strikes, but there was no single moment of invention. In fact, the light bulb was not one invention, but a whole network of time-consuming inventions each requiring one or more chemists, mathematicians, physicists, engineers, and glass blowers.

Yes, Edison was a genius. But he was not always one. His biographer, Paul Israel, sifting through all the available information, thinks he was more or less a regular boy of his time and place. ...What eventually set him apart was his mindset. He tried and failed and tried and failed and tried and tried again.

What's your priority?

If you had to choose, which would it be? Loads of success for accomplishing easy tasks? Or lots of challenge?

People are all born with a love of learning, but the fixed mindset can undo it. Think of a time you were enjoying something—doing a crossword puzzle, playing a sport, learning a new game or dance. Then it became hard and you wanted out. Maybe you suddenly felt tired, dizzy, bored, or hungry. Next time it happens, don't fool yourself. It's the fixed mindset. (Choose to) put yourself in the growth mindset. Picture your brain forming new neuron connections as you meet the challenge and learn. Keep on going. It's your choice.

