

THE LEADERS MINDSET

How to develop this in your organisation
(and why it's never been more important.)

A White Paper by Cathy Burke

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	03
2. The Current Reality	04
3. What Are Mindsets?	07
4. Fixed and Growth Mindsets	08
5. Limited and Expansive Mindsets	10
6. The Leadership Quadrant	12
7. The Mindset Process	16
8. The Business Case	18
9. In Summary	20
10. Where To From Here	21
11. References	22
12. About Cathy Burke	23
13. What Others Say about Cathy	24

Introduction

As a global leader in The Hunger Project, I learned the remarkable truth about the power of mindsets. No matter what situation or circumstance we face, whether we are in a third world village or a global organisation, our ability to harness mindsets to overcome enormous challenges is remarkably uniform.

Let's look at how this works.

When I first went to Bangladesh in 1998, there was hunger and widespread poverty. People worked long hours in the field, yet didn't have enough food to feed their families. Conditions were harsh and entrenched, with limited access to education, especially for women. People felt resigned, cynical, and hopeless about the future. It seemed that if any change was to happen in their village, it could only be through an outside intervention like a truck of food arriving, or bags of money being distributed. People believed it was beyond their ability to meaningfully impact their situation.

Now in our organisations, we don't face the same dire circumstances, yet the mindset mechanism is still the same. The complex shifting external environment, and the pace of disruption has people feeling powerless and disengaged. Employees are working long hours, yet they feel like they're not getting ahead. People don't believe they can do anything about it. Some change programs are introduced, but they don't really work. Innovation and collaboration stall. There is a sense of failure and futility. The impact on mental health is immense.

The tipping point into a better future in both scenarios is the same – it comes down to building a Leaders Mindset.

This white paper will explore what mindsets are, and how to create a leadership mindset in your organisation.

The Current Reality

We are facing greater challenges and increasing complexity than ever before, and this is not going to get any easier.

Let's dive into three very common ones.

1. So. Much. Change!

It seems like we have reached capacity, and there is no scope to take on anything else. People worry that there isn't enough time, money or resources to deliver on their goals. What's worked in the past isn't serving now, yet the same approaches and tactics keep being made because we don't know what else to do. Change seems risky given the other constraints.

Our external environment is throwing everything at us, especially now. Global pandemics, work from home, worry about health, and lockdowns bring huge destabilization, even while the normal disruptions keep coming at us. New regulations, a more aware customer base, new technologies, changing competitor landscape add to the load. Our competing priorities cause added stress and confusion. It's hard to work on what's important when you're overtaken by urgency and fighting fires.

The way we used to lead and respond isn't cutting it. Management that 'doubles down' on old ways that used to bring some efficiencies and success, now see limited results at best.

Kropp, Cambon, and Clark,
Harvard Business Review, June 2021

Pandemic disruption “will require organizations and their HR functions to develop their managers’ skills, awaken their mindsets to manage in new ways, and create the capacity across the organization to enable this shift.”

2. People are overwhelmed and stressed

Even the most competent people are pushing up against overwhelm. The pace and high expectations, coupled with long hours and 24/7 response expectations leaves workers not coping and feeling uncared for. High rates of stress, anxiety and other mental health issues are not imagined. In 2020 the World Health Organization officially recognised workplace 'burnout' as an occupational phenomenon, resulting from 'chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed.' (1)

The cost of this stress to human wellbeing is high, with its links to depression, heart disease and unhealthy habits. (2) The cost to business is also high. In a survey of global senior HR leaders (3), 95% found employee burnout sabotaging workplace retention, with 46% saying up to half of their annual workforce turnover is due to burnout.

Even when people stay, a 2018 survey of 1500 USA and UK workers by Wrike (4), showed that 46 percent of employees say they've "checked out or stopped caring," due to stress.

3. High levels of disengagement

Whilst we hear of the 'war for talent', too many people languish in their organisations. The talent and capability of great people is not empowered.

According to Gallup's State of the American Workplace Report 2021, 80% of employees worldwide are disengaged at work. This is an increase of 2 points, from 78% in 2019, following a steady drop over the last decade. What a waste of human ability! According to another study of more than 100,000 business units, those with high employee engagement "achieve higher productivity, higher customer loyalty/ engagement, better safety, lower turnover and higher profitability, among other positive business outcomes." (5)

The turbulence and chaos that marked the last few years is not going away. New ways of thinking and leading are required.

With so many issues that need addressing, how do we respond?

It's natural to look outside to try and gain power to face these challenges. Whilst there are improvements and trainings that organisations can do to help people be more productive, without a mindset upgrade, they won't be sustainable or effective.

Developing a Leaders Mindset has never been more critical to a person's leadership, and an organisation's future.

Mindset work is now recognised as a '*need to have*', not a '*nice to have*.'

What Are Mindsets?

Mindsets are the stories, assumptions, and beliefs that we tell ourselves about our self, each other, the world, or the situation we are in.

Over time these beliefs become truths, and we stop questioning them, or even seeing them. Mindsets become 'just the way it is' - like that wall, or the sky being blue. We don't even notice them. They become the frame that we build our lives on, and we don't realise how this determines how we work and how we live.

Mindsets are like an operating system on your computer, ticking away in the background. While we think we are in control, it's our mindsets that chooses - what we do (and don't do), what we say yes (or no) to, and how we respond to different situations

Many of our mindsets have been with us a large part of our life, carefully honed over time. They start to feel like us. Part of our personality. Who we are. We make our decisions based on them. *"I can't go for that promotion, I'm not confident enough."* *"It's no use trying to learn French, I'm just not good with languages."* *"I'd like to be in a relationship, but all the good ones are taken"*. These beliefs feel real. They have a lived in quality to them. We have some proof for them. But they are mindsets and not the truth.

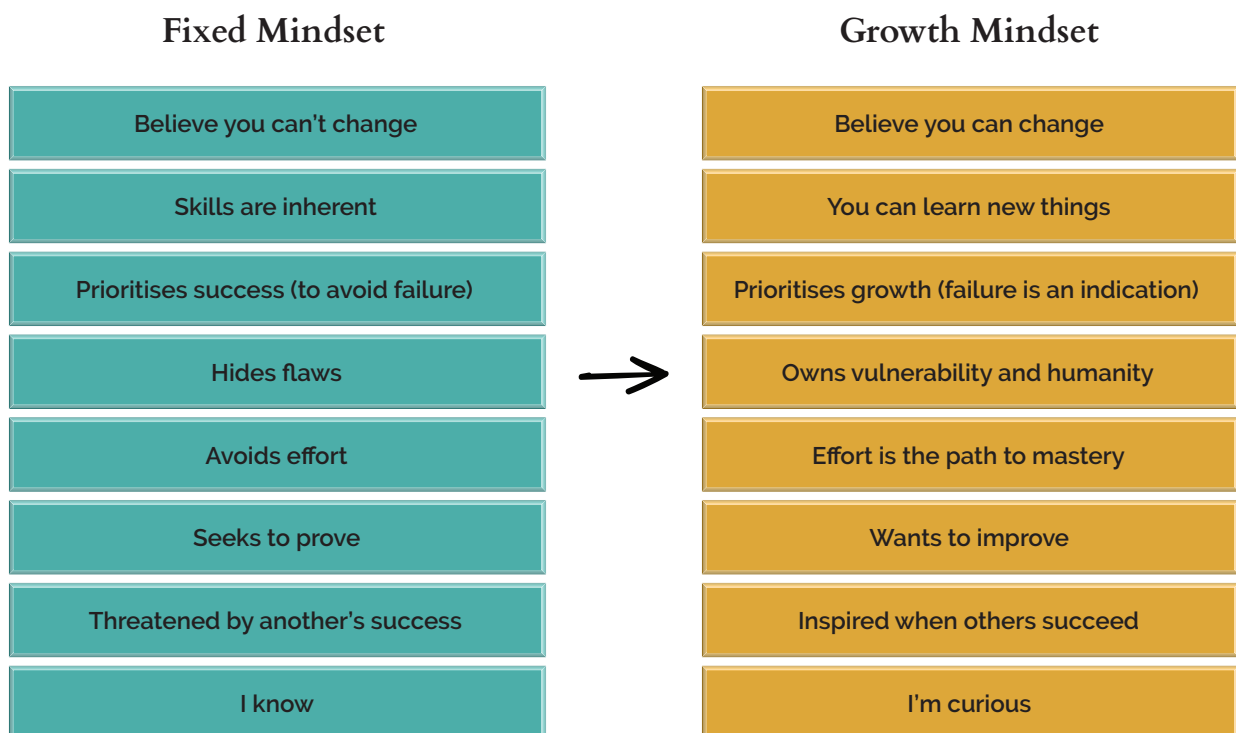
Mindsets are like glasses that we put on, that over time we forget we are even wearing. Imagine you put on a pair of blue glasses. At first, the world seems blue. Everything you look at is blue. After a while you forget what it was like before always wearing blue glasses. Over time, the world doesn't just look blue to you. It is blue.

Mindsets are not bad or good. They can work for you, or hold you back. Mindsets help us make sense of the world. This is why it's crucial for leaders to truly know the mindsets that are running them, and to develop this mastery in their organisation.

Fixed And Growth Mindsets

The research around mindsets burst into popular understanding in large part through the research and thought leadership of Stanford professor Carol Dweck.⁽⁶⁾ Dweck has studied mindsets for more than 30 years, and identified 2 primary mindsets – Fixed and Growth.

A Fixed mindset is when a person believes they have only a finite and particular set of skills and abilities, and these determine how successful they will be in something. A Growth mindset sees that yes, a person has certain skills and experiences, but they can always grow and learn more – they are curious about things. We each have both Fixed and Growth mindsets, though one might be more prevalent than the other in different contexts.



An exciting factor of Dweck's research (and validated in hundreds of other experiments) is that mindsets can be changed – you are not fated to remain fixed in a certain area forever! This is huge for developing the leadership capabilities in our people. It removes barriers to growth and change. If you've been holding back on being a better leader, or doing further study, or putting yourself forward for promotion because *"that's not me"* or *"I can't do that"* – then it's good to know that this is not the case. Change and growth are part of every human's birth right.

When you find yourself not wanting to take a risk and try something where the outcome isn't certain, or you stick in your lane of competency and don't veer out of it, you can be confident a Fixed Mindset is at play. If you believe you just are a certain way, and this will never change, or your team 'just doesn't get it', or you think you need to act like you have it all together - all the time, consider this might be a Fixed Mindset.

An example is speaking up in a meeting. If you have a Fixed mindset about this, you will stay quiet. You say to yourself *"I'm not a good speaker"*, or *"I don't want to look foolish"*, or *"They won't want to hear my opinion"*. You might even try a few times to speak in a meeting, and if it doesn't go as well as you hoped, you think "there, I knew I shouldn't have tried that. I'm not confident enough to get my point across." You then always stay quiet in meetings. You believe you just don't have that ability.

A person with a Growth mindset might also feel shy to talk in meetings. The difference is they persevere because they know it is an important skill they can develop. They understand that speaking in meetings, building their influence, and getting your voice heard is something they can practice. The first few tries might not go well, but they recognize that this is a skill they are learning. They use each experience of speaking up in a meeting to learn and grow. Even when an attempt is not successful, with a growth mindset they might say *"Oh, that didn't go well. Next time I'll speak louder / not wait till the end / speak more clearly"*. With a growth mindset, you know that every time you try, you are given more data points to learn from.

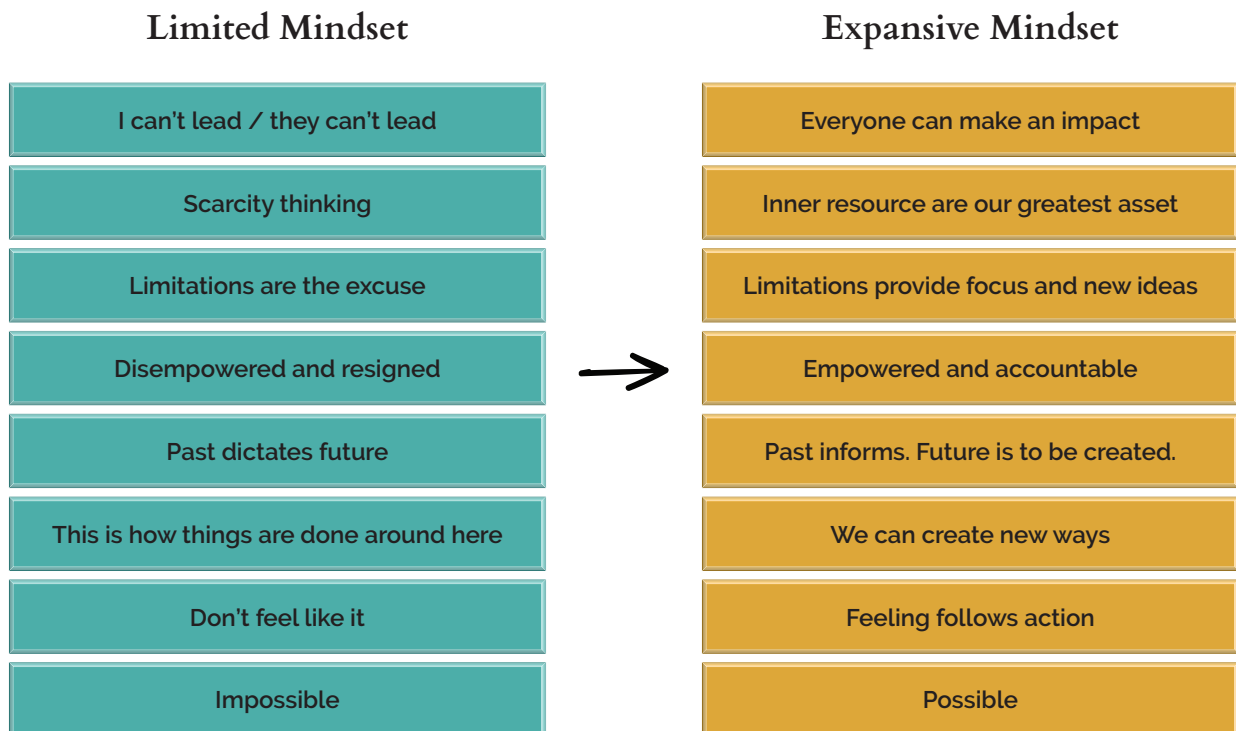
The challenge is the same (speaking in meetings). The response to it differs depending on the mindset.

As Dweck says:

"Believing that your qualities are carved in stone — the fixed mindset — creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over. If you have only a certain amount of intelligence, a certain personality, and a certain moral character — well, then you'd better prove that you have a healthy dose of them. It simply wouldn't do to look or feel deficient in these most basic characteristics. (7)

Limited And Expansive Mindsets

The work I did for 20 years across five continents and many different contexts showed me an additional way to consider mindsets - as either Expansive or Limited.



Limited mindsets keep us small and contained. They restrict our horizon, and what we think can be accomplished.

When you have a Limited mindset about a particular situation, you are resigned about your power to impact it. You might feel hopeless and defeated, thinking “*why bother?*”. You get overwhelmed. Frustrated. You see all the reasons why something can't or won't happen, or why something is wrong.

With a Limited mindset, something is happening to you or around you that you are helpless in the face of. It stifles possibilities. A Limited mindset is based on the past, and projects that into the present and future. Scarcity thinking is a hallmark of the Limited mindset. This is a belief that there is not enough of something crucial – time, money, people, resources, for you to be able to succeed.

The Limited mindset showed up for a team at a major bank. They were hurtling toward their end of financial year deadlines, and morale was low. People could not see how their targets could be met and they were in the grip of Scarcity. The Limited mindset reigned. There was not enough time, days, clients and bandwidth to achieve their goals. A pervasive mindset of *"we can't do this", "there's not enough time" "the economic climate won't let this happen"* was shared by all. The team, though smart and committed, could not see any possibility because their circumstances seemed too difficult. Whatever action they took was coloured by this mindset, which is why the team leader got me in to work with his people.

Understanding the Expansive mindset was part of the transformation. Where Limited mindsets constrict, Expansive mindsets empower. They expand our sense of what is possible and achievable.

Expansive mindsets are not based on the past. You are not limited to what you know – you can embrace the unknowns. Instead of finding the reasons something can't be done, you think "What if?" or "Why not?"

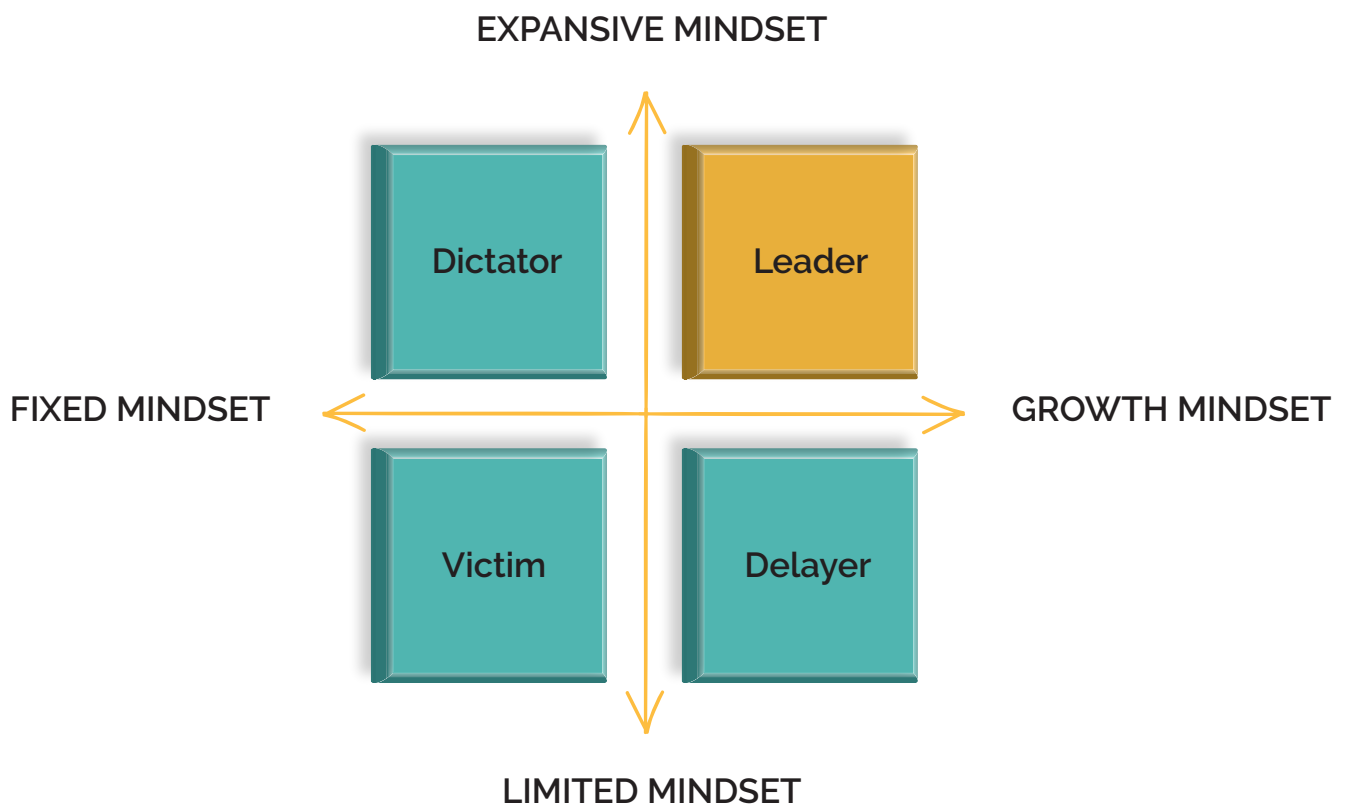
With the bank team example, shifting into an Expansive mindset had them approach their clients differently. They used the time they did have between calls to centre themselves and choose their mindset instead of react. They reorganised resources between the team in a different way, from the more siloed approach of before. New people managers who had come into the role after being good analysts, were given specific coaching so they could get the best from their team and not criticise and micro manage. The team ended up smashing through their targets and deadline, and they did so in a way that left them pumped for the next year – not exhausted and wrung out. All through utilising the power of mindsets.

With an Expansive mindset, circumstances and challenges are not overlooked or concealed. This isn't positive thinking. When deadlines are coming at you, you need to deal with the reality as it is. You don't spend time wishing things were a different way, or looking for excuses or justifications. Instead, you are able to look at the conditions in an open way. You mobilise the resources you do have, and deploy them in a different way. With an Expansive mindset, you get curious about the possibilities that exist.

The Leadership Quadrant

Fixed and Growth, Limited and Expansive mindsets intersect in a way that can point to the leadership behaviours we fall to without thinking.

Have a look at this, and consider which quadrant you find yourself in under pressure.



Dictator mindset is where Expansive and Fixed mindsets intersect. This is a way of leading that says *"I know"*. *"Do it my way."* It is Expansive because it sees big goals are possible and great things can be achieved, but it is Fixed because you lead from fear, fearing failure most of all. Dictator doesn't trust others to do the job the 'right way'. They have a *'my way or the highway'* attitude. They are unilateral decision makers.

Lots of leaders in organisations default to Dictator under pressure. They may not like it, but it seems to get the job done, right? Well, maybe.

Over time, Dictator is not as effective as we think. Dictator's lead believing only they can do it, thus disabling the abilities of others around them. They don't empower and develop others – why would they when they believe skills are fixed? Dictators can fall into micro-managing. They stifle the debate and conversation that is integral to solving complex issues. People are silenced and become disengaged around a Dictator.

If you find yourself defaulting to Dictator, identify the main mindsets for you in the Fixed mindset that are constraining you and choose the corresponding Growth mindset to reframe. Consider which Expansive mindsets you want to boost.

Victim mindset is found in the bottom left quadrant, where Fixed and Limited mindsets intersect. Victim mindset is one we can all – ahem – fall victim to. It is easily triggered – that disappointing piece of news. Critical feedback from a manager. Not making your quarterly target...

Where Dictators say *"This is what you'll do"*, Victims say *"I don't know what to do"* *"Tell me what to do."* When you're leading from a Victim mindset, you waste energy complaining and wishing things were different. You spend time catastrophising, building issues up into insurmountable hurdles. And you lack accountability, passing the buck. If things are outside your control, how can anyone blame you for not coming through with the goods?

To move out of Victim and into a Leaders Mindset, identify the Limited and Fixed mindsets that have you blocked. Work with their antidote – the relevant Expansive and Growth mindsets needed to transform this mindset.

Delayer is found in the bottom right quadrant, and is a combination of Fixed and Expansive mindsets. People leading with this mindset find themselves procrastinating and delaying – a lot. They put off actions and decisions. Like driving a car with one foot on the accelerator and the other on the brake,

Delayers want to go forward because they see things are possible (Expansive mindset) – but they think *“Not now, I’m not ready. We can’t do that yet.”* (Limited mindset).

To move from Delayer, notice you have access to some Growth mindset capabilities. Identify the Fixed mindsets holding you back and choose a Growth mindset to get you unstuck.

The top right quadrant is where the **Leaders Mindset** sits. A Leaders Mindset is found through the combination of a Growth mindset, where you know you can learn and grow continually (and you know that others can too), and the Expansive mindset, where you see that things are possible. This is our optimal, most effective way to lead.

When leading with this mindset, you are resilient to knock-backs and rejection. Failure doesn't stop you, or define you. You are inspired by what is possible. You combine a powerful vision with effective action. You mobilise others to help bring this about.

A main misconception of a Leaders Mindset, is that it's somehow a bit soft. That its ok for when times are good, but people can mistake it for a focus all on empathy and kindness, and less on results. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Leading with a Leaders Mindset takes rigour and application. You:

- Hold people to account
- You have a bold vision and you work to bring it about
- You instill responsibility in your people
- You believe in your own and others ability to grow, learn, evolve and achieve
- You measure and track your success
- You know what your people are capable of, and you work with them so they get it too
- You don't get blown off course when the conditions become unfavourable.

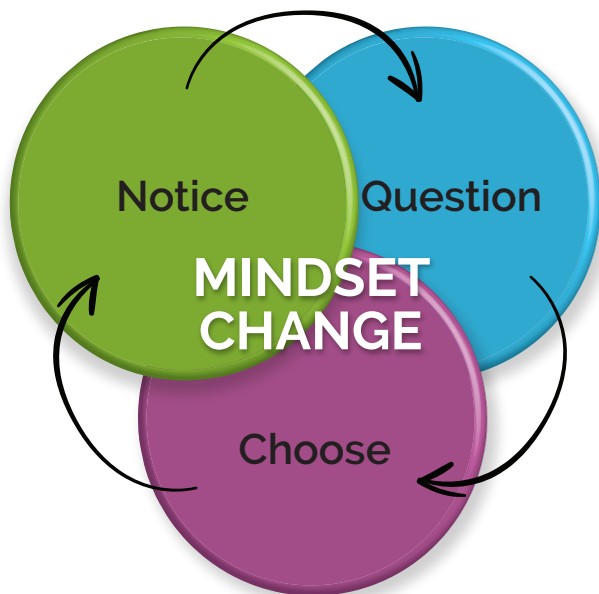
You can activate this Leaders Mindset in yourself and others – no matter where you sit in an organisation, and no matter how difficult the conditions you find yourself in.

The most inspiring and impactful leaders with this mindset I've met are village women across South Asia and Africa. They are committed to ending hunger in their homes and community, and they are completely focused on the result – sometimes a literal matter of life and death. They are not wishy washy. They lead in the only way that will deliver sustainable outcomes and a change in the long term culture.

They lead with a Leaders Mindset.

The Mindset Process

Being aware of your mindset, and developing mindsets that support and build your leadership is critical. So how do you do it? How do you harness a Leaders Mindset, especially when the conditions are difficult and you find yourself leading and making decisions from a less optimal mindset?



The Mindset Process is how. It will help you catch the mindsets holding you back, and grow and develop as a leader.

Let's unpack briefly how this works.

Noticing is the first part of the Mindset Process, and this is because until we become aware of what we are thinking or telling ourselves, we can never change. You can't change what you don't observe.

Noticing sounds simple, but it is not. We are so rarely present. When we feel discomfort, we have immediate mechanisms to deflect. We are adept at reacting to what is in front of us, but not noticing the underlying mindset that gives rise to the reaction.

Noticing is less about noticing the circumstances, and more about seeing where we are blaming, complaining, or feeling disengaged and 'over it'. Noticing the mindset is where the change starts.

Questioning is the next step. This can take courage – especially when the mindset we are questioning is linked to our seemingly reasonable reaction to difficulties, or to stories we've had for a while. In questioning, we get to see that what we have told ourselves about a situation may not actually be the truth! There are lots of ways to question your mindset. Ask yourself what you are believing about this situation. What's another way to think about it? What's the impact of holding on to this mindset?

With questioning, you are not necessarily questioning whether the condition is true. You are questioning your response to those conditions, and what you are making it mean about you, them, and it.

Choosing is the final step. Identify an empowering mindset you most want, and choose to lead with that. As Viktor Frankl reminded us in *Man's Search for Meaning*, *"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."*(8)

We all have the power to choose a new mindset. It can feel strange at first, like putting on a new pair of shoes. You might need to walk around for a while, practicing the new mindset, before it feels comfortable.

The Mindset Process isn't a one time thing, like a magic panacea. You don't just handle it once and think that's done. When you remember that the older, limiting mindsets have been with you a long time, it makes sense that the new one will need lots of practice. New mindsets are always bumping up against your old beliefs. Think of them like a muscle. It needs to be practiced.

When you have your new mindset you want to take on, you must then determine your next action. Mindset realisations without a corresponding shift in behaviour becomes just a meaningless insight. What action will you take that aligns with this new mindset?

The Business Case

For developing a Leaders Mindset

When leaders in organizations exhibit a Fixed mindset, there is an inevitable limit to growth. This mindset might have served the person in the past - the drive to prove yourself, and avoid failure can help one rise in an organization. But it won't create leadership in others, and it's insufficient to what's being demanded of leaders now.

While people in an organisation might be technically proficient, being a leader requires skills which don't come naturally to many people. Most leaders are made, not born. Developing leadership takes time and support.

This is why mindsets are recognised as key to organisational performance and individual wellbeing. And increasingly, the two can't be separated.

David Mallon
Vice President and Chief Analyst
at Bersin by Deloitte Consulting
LLP, 2019

“So much of what needs to change in organizations comes down to mindset. Twenty-first-century leaders are expected to have a growth mindset.”

Microsoft is a great example of how a business can grow through applying mindsets. For years Microsoft had stalled as a pioneer and innovator. Internally there was a culture of superiority, siloes, and a fear of failure, and this was reflected in its share price which had stagnated for 10 years.

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella took over in 2014, and focused deliberately on transforming the mindset within Microsoft. In his book *“Hit Refresh”* (9), Nadella writes of his focus on mindsets, and how shifting them from 'know-it-all's' to 'learners' was the key to this success.

Ibarra, Rattan and Johnston,
London Business School, 2018

“By developing a leadership mindset, managers and team members become more positive, innovative, open and engaged despite the tsunami of constant change. Focusing on mindsets is the reason Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella gives for the doubling of share price in just 4 years.”

The research shows that the success at Microsoft is not a one-off example. The value in putting mindsets front and centre of developing leaders has a proven business case.

Scott Keller and Bill Schaninger,
Beyond Performance 2.0
(Wiley 2019)

Mindset “is in fact, most important if you want to lead successful and sustainable change at scale.”

The Senn Delaney-Stanford organizational mindset study 2014 (10) found:

TRUST: Workers have 47% higher trust in their company.

ENGAGEMENT: Workers are 34% more likely to feel a sense of ownership and commitment to the future of their company.

INNOVATION: Workers show 65% stronger agreement that their company supports risk-taking.

ETHICS: Workers believed 41% more strongly that their organizations supported ethical behaviour.

Schroder, Moran,
Donnellan & Moser 2014

“Teams using growth mindset are better able to openly express disagreements, accept feedback from one another, increase their confidence over trials, and end up setting more challenging goals for themselves in the long run. “

In Summary

1. Whilst there are some tips, tools and techniques to help people deal with challenges and increasing complexity, without a mindset upgrade, they won't be sustainable or effective.
2. Working with mindsets reframe challenges. Even when it is not possible to change a challenging situation, effective responses that build resilience and new pathways can be achieved through developing mindset capabilities.
3. A Leaders Mindset activates and opens up new possibilities. What else is possible for your business? How might you think about this expansively. A Leaders Mindset is how you access new horizons.
4. Leaders Mindsets can be developed in people, in teams and across organizations.
5. With leadership looking a certain way, too many people are opting out because they don't see themselves as 'leadership material'. Reimagining what leadership is – who has it and how it looks will increase an organization's leadership pipeline.

If you are committed to supporting and developing yourself and your people, having mind-sets as a key pillar is critical to getting the most impact from your initiatives.

**Prof Gottfredson and
Asst. Prof Reina,
Science Direct Journal, 2020**

“75% of organizations rated their leadership development programs as not very effective. This is because most overlook a specific attribute that is foundational to how leaders think, learn, and behave: their mindsets.”

Where To From Here

Take the free Leaders Mindset diagnostic for yourself and your team. Based on real work examples, find out what your mindsets are, and your gaps. Discover new insights tailored on how you score that will help you develop a Leaders Mindset.

Take the diagnostic →

Cathy Burke's experience in building leadership mindsets is available to your organization. Her work helps people break through limiting beliefs and unhelpful mindsets, and inspires new thinking and possibilities.

To find out more about Cathy, or to be in contact with her about how she might support you, please do so at www.cathyburke.com

Contact Cathy Burke →

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About Cathy Burke



Cathy Burke is a speaker, author, trainer, mentor and change maker.

She helps organizations and people develop the mindsets, leadership and skills needed to address 21st Century challenges. Cathy designs and leads transformational programs for executives grappling with complexity. She unlocks new capacities in teams and people.

Cathy understands leadership. For 20 years she was the CEO for The Hunger Project Australia, and then Global Vice President, working to end hunger across South Asia and Africa.

Cathy was an integral member of a visionary team who developed leadership at scale in villages all over the world. Through her work, millions of the world's poorest people stepped into their leadership, and were able to feed themselves and their families.

Cathy learned about the power of mindsets, and the innate capacity people have to address difficult circumstances and overcome them. She believes expressing leadership is available to everyone, and that it's never been more important to activate this ability in organizations worldwide.

Cathy is an awarded CEO, including the Australian Davos leadership award, and the 2014 AFR Women of Influence award. She is the author of *Unlikely Leaders: Lessons in Leadership from the Village Classroom*. Her new book *The Mindset Process* will be available late 2021.

What Others Say About Cathy

Joris Heeze, Director,
SPS Operations Americas
and EMEA, Amazon

“Cathy has an ability to role model and inspire diversity and inclusion, while also earning the trust of everyone she works with. The impact that Cathy has had to my team is significant, both on a personal and professional level.”

Steve Boehm, COO, Barings

While SVP of Global Customer Experience at eBay, my leadership team and I worked very hard to create a global culture focused on leadership excellence and inclusiveness. Cathy's work with us was pivotal to achieving our goals.”

Tania Austin, Owner, CEO Decjuba

“Cathy was instrumental in challenging the team to look at things differently, creating a unique leadership angle, and reaching for every inch of potential from the team.”

Jon Williams, Global Leader,
People and Organization, PwC

“Cathy Burke’s unique voice and insights on leadership will influence the way we think about change and culture for years to come.”

Nick Nairn, CEO, Stuart Alexander

“Cathy has been instrumental in challenging and implementing a mindset change across my Leadership Team. This has been done in a highly collaborative way that has been fit for purpose for us. We continue to work with Cathy to help guide us through this mindset journey for our next level leaders”

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