
Legislative Staff Week: Toolbox

RESILIENCY

Mindset Matters in Tough Times

BY CURT STEDRON

How do you respond to feedback? Do you get sensitive, interpreting the comments as attacks on your ability, intelligence or performance? Or do you welcome the remarks as opportunities to grow and improve?

If a critique gets your hackles up, you may have what Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck calls a “fixed mindset”—a belief that your intelligence and talents are static and impervious to change.

But if you relish feedback, you likely have a “growth mindset,” which Dweck defines as a belief that your abilities are dynamic and can develop over time. Her research suggests that our mindset is key to determining how we react to obstacles, criticism and setbacks.

‘Fixed’ Versus ‘Growth’

Life in the legislature is filled with challenges. If we face them with a fixed mindset, research shows that we are more likely to ignore useful feedback and to give up more easily when times get even tougher—as they surely have!

But if we can adopt a growth mindset, we might find that our effort, persistence and acceptance of criticism actually increase when we encounter obstacles, helping us to improve our overall performance.

In a study at the U.S. Military Academy, a growth mindset was found to be far more predictive of cadets’ success than either IQ or physical ability. Cadets with a growth mindset demonstrated greater resiliency and perseverance, or what psychologist Angela Duckworth calls “grit.” A

growth mindset, she says, focuses our attention on process and strategy instead of outcomes and achievements. We come to see setbacks as opportunities rather than disappointments. Improve your processes, and you might find that—voilà!—your performance improves as well, whether you’re crafting a difficult piece of legislation or trying to solve a knotty constituent problem.

So how do we cultivate a growth mindset in our legislative institutions? It starts with you. In the box on the right are three research-approved techniques to help you get going.

The Power of Yet

A high school in Chicago instituted a strategy where students who were unsuccessful on an assignment received a grade of “not yet.” The point was to shift the focus—the mindset—of teachers and students alike from a fixed measure (score) to a growth measure (process). Students began to see achievement as changeable over time, and overall grades and scores improved. Dweck calls this “the power of yet.”

The legislature is the ultimate dynamic environment. COVID-19 proved that. Circumstances change constantly, obstacles emerge unexpectedly, criticism is a fact of life. Yet we can unlock the effort, resiliency and grit of legislators and staff by adopting a mindset that thrives in this reality—a growth mindset. When we do that, we unlock our own legislative power of yet.

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1 | Assess your current mindset.

Ask yourself how you feel about your ability to perform various aspects of your job—how you write, research, lead the caucus, speak in public. Where is your answer on the spectrum between fixed (“I’m terrible/pretty good at that”) and growth (“I could get better with some help”)? Identifying where you might be fixed is a crucial first step toward growth.

2 | Change the way you praise yourself and others.

Dweck’s research shows that we improve more when we praise effort, strategy and process rather than intelligence, talent and results. Struggling math students made significant gains when praised for their approach to problems, rather than their correct answers. In the legislature, focus your praise on the committee or bill drafting process to improve chances for future success.

3 | Conduct regular postmortems of completed projects.

For legislative staff, make such reviews part of your routine, instead of waiting for a midyear performance appraisal or other formal evaluation. Focus praise or criticism on strategy and process, not on products or results.

—Curt Stedron