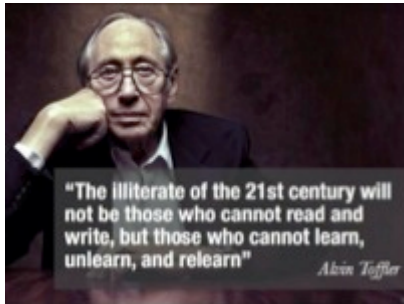


Fixed Mindset or Growth Mindset? How Learning Mindsets May Be Stifling Law Firm Change

By [LawVision](#) on September 1, 2014



Salman Khan, an innovative educator, recently wrote an article [featured in *The Huffington Post*](#) about two mindsets which influence how individuals approach learning. In his article, Khan contrasts two specific perspectives on learning and intelligence: 1) fixed mindsets which he posits “mistakenly believe that people are either smart or not;” and 2) growth mindsets that believe “capability and intelligence can be grown through effort, struggle and failure.”

In my discussions with lawyers and law firms over the years, there is often an undertone of this fixed mindset pervasive in many law firm cultures: A prevailing belief that the firm and its partners are inherently one way or another. And more recently, particularly as firms grapple with how to re-invent themselves to stay current and competitive in the new economy, a growing number of lawyers are expressing frustration with peers or leaders who resist change.

Certainly, this resistance to change is not a new concept. Dr. Larry Richard’s research on lawyer personalities documents a group with characteristics (such as low resilience and risk aversion) that make it highly resistant to change. Attorneys’ aversion to change is also oft-cited by industry analysts. Yet the notion that perhaps the way attorneys view learning and intelligence could be the catalyst for this perception is less ubiquitous. Perhaps more importantly, the potential for exposure to an alternative – the growth mindset – as a stimulus to change, as yet unexplored. Consider:

1. **A fixed mindset may accept their own past success as proof of an inherent strength – and apply the same test to others.** Those who have had previous success at business development, for example, may resist coaching even though they find themselves challenged by the increasingly competitive market. Equally important, rainmakers who are frustrated by their younger lawyers’ struggles with developing business may perceive their own success as the result of an innate capability and conclude that those coming up behind them simply don’t have “what it takes.” This perspective deters change.
2. **A fixed mindset may discount data as invalid if it conflicts with their core belief.** In a fixed mindset, it is a zero sum game. A once renowned specialty boutique that suddenly finds itself faced with client feedback critiquing their quality, for example, may summarily dismiss the information. Or equally plausible, they may distance themselves from the source of the reproach, choosing instead to blame others at the firm (most often Associates). The concept that quality can decline or that value of a certain specialty may erode as clients’ needs change may be difficult to grasp for an individual whose framework states “we can only be one way or the other. We believe we are the best, therefore we are.” This thinking hinders change.

3. **A fixed mindset may overlook opportunities outside of their perceived core strength.** Individuals with fixed mindsets are less likely to take on new challenges or try something at which they may not excel right away. Cross-selling and new practice development often push lawyers outside of their comfort zone. In organizations prevalent with individuals with fixed mindsets it is not surprising these efforts will stall. A fixed mindset underestimates its capacity to evolve. This standpoint resists change.

The upside? According to research by Dr. Carol Dweck of Stanford University as referenced in Salman Kahn's post, learning mindsets are malleable. With the right exposure and information individuals can essentially "reprogram" what they believe about inherent intelligence and capabilities. Perhaps in just reading this piece a few of you are already taking the step toward a growth mindset. Applied more broadly to a firm's attorneys, what would adoption of a growth mindset – learning through "effort, struggle and failure" – empower a firm to accomplish?