



Learning Mindset for Leaders

“Expertise at learning has become the key capability necessary for survival, success and fulfillment.”

David A. Kolb & Bauback Yeganeh

INTRODUCTION

Adaptive challenges, complex problems, volatile business environments – increasingly these are just some of the circumstances business leaders find themselves in, placing unprecedented demands on their capabilities to be effective. Recently, after a period of faltering corporate performance, IBM Chief Executive Virginia Rometty put the entire company on notice, telling employees “Where we haven’t transformed rapidly enough, we struggled. We have to step up with that and deal with that, and that is on all levels.” (Wall Street Journal, April 24, 2013) Undoubtedly, IBM is not alone in the struggle to keep up with the challenges of changing markets and conditions. Many organizations today are operating in an environment characterized by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA¹), and as a result their leaders are likely struggling with major challenges they have never had to deal with before. Effectively responding to these challenges means that today’s organizations “demand a ‘Learning-Integrated Life’ – where individuals are always in a learning mindset.”² Leaders must be able to quickly size up people and situations, make tough decisions and take appropriate action without complete information, and flexibly change on the fly in order to produce results in new, demanding, first-time situations.

¹ Volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Wikipedia article, sourced January 30, 2020.

² *The Future of Lifelong Learning – Designing for a Learning-Integrated Life*. D2L Corporation, 2020.



Succeeding in such conditions requires leaders to actively and intentionally learn from their day-to-day experience. They must apply what they are learning to new challenging situations, and continue learning as they go forward. Unfortunately, the ability to learn from experience is a capability that many leaders either take for granted or ignore outright. However, the leaders who consistently practice the skills and tactics of learning from experience are significantly better equipped to deal with the complexities and challenges of modern business life.

LEARNING MINDSET OVERVIEW

“The ability to learn is a defining characteristic of being human; the ability to continue learning is an essential skill of leadership. When leaders lose that ability, they inevitably falter.” Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas

“Experience is the best teacher.” How many times have we heard that, or said it ourselves? When it comes to developing as a leader, it is widely held that experience is a central component. Unfortunately, having an experience does not guarantee learning from it. Many people do not learn from experience, because they lack the knowledge and skills needed to do so. Research has shown that providing opportunities and challenging assignments to leaders doesn’t automatically result in their development. A study by Fiedler³ actually found that longer leader tenure and experience was negatively correlated with team performance. Many leadership and learning theorists have found that learning from experience is not a passive process, but requires an approach to living that makes learning one’s primary and most important focus. It may be true that experience is the best teacher, but only for those who actively utilize specific learning strategies and skills to derive the lessons of experience.

³ Fiedler, F. E. (1970). Leadership experience and leader performance: Another hypothesis shot to hell. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*(5), 1-14.



The problem is that most of us live our lives on “automatic pilot,” making little or no effort to learn from our experiences. Have you ever gone through your workday, running from meeting to meeting, and suddenly discovered that the day is over and you don’t recall anything you did or said? We all develop patterns or habits of behavior that make it easier and simpler to go through life, without having to think about things every single time. This phenomenon is called “automaticity,” when you can perform a skill without having to consciously think about it. However, this also hurts us because it leads to our sleepwalking through valuable experiences that hold hidden learning, if only we could notice! The speed of business makes it extremely difficult to break the habit patterns that we use to move at pace through our workdays. If we assume that learning happens automatically and give little thought or energy to learning or improving our learning capability, then we miss out on opportunities to learn, grow, and develop as leaders.

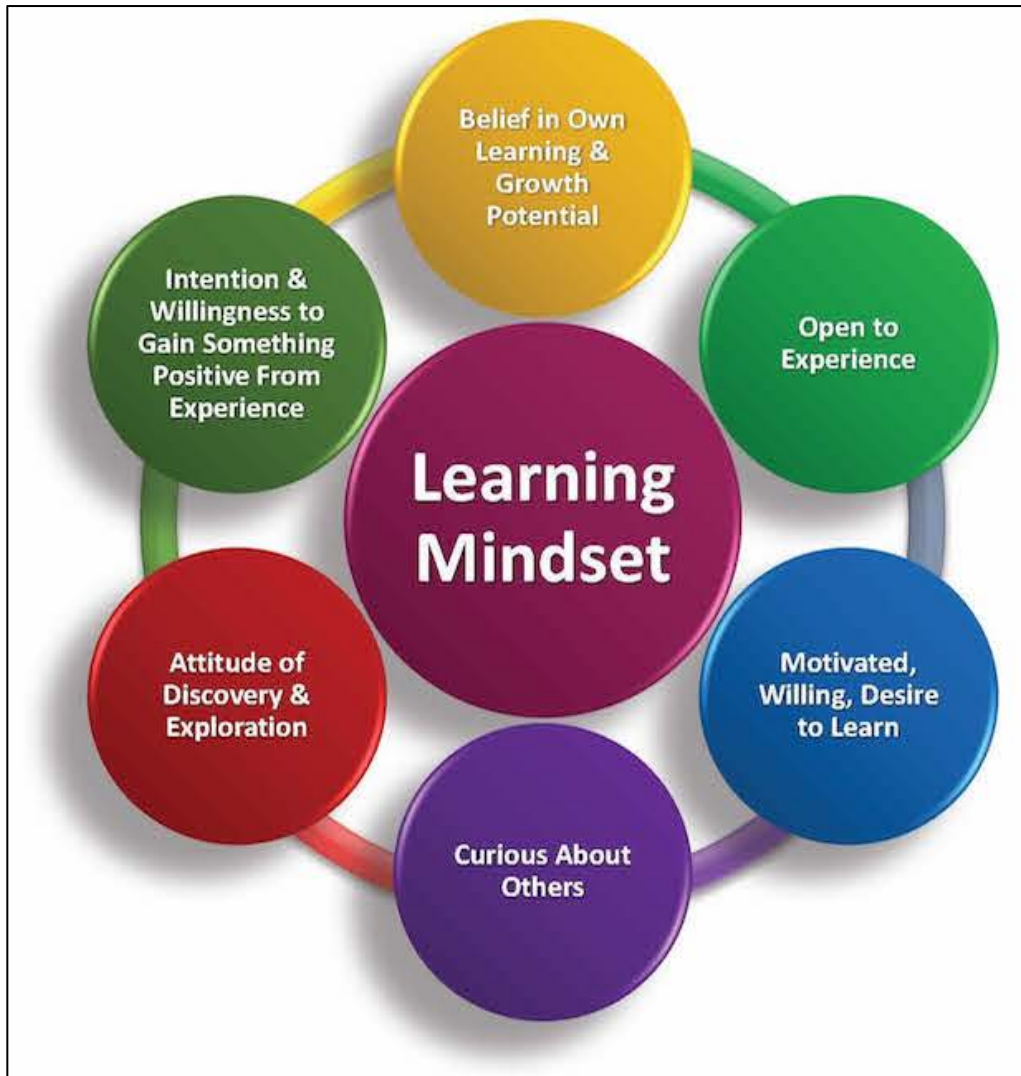
To get the most out of your day-to-day experiences, focus on enacting a **Learning Mindset** and the **Learning Practices** that follow. These two elements of learning from experience go hand in hand: from a Learning Mindset (attitude) emerge Learning Practices (actions).

What is “Learning Mindset”?

Think of a mindset as a habitual or characteristic mental attitude that determines how you will interpret and respond to situations. In the context of learning from experience, a Learning Mindset is an attitude that predisposes you to be open to new experiences, to believe you can and will learn, and to intentionally grow and develop from your experience. It includes the set of assumptions and beliefs that govern how you think about and approach experience and opportunities, and whether you generally see them as opportunities to learn and develop, as well as



your typical affective stance toward learning, your emotional state or feeling about learning, learning situations, and new experiences.



Leaders who have a Learning Mindset see opportunities to learn in all aspects of their work life and tend to learn more than those who are closed to learning.



~ THE LEARNING MINDSET MODEL ~

The following list of the Learning Mindset model's six dimensions and their descriptors summarizes the key aspects of the model.

1. Open to Experience

- Open to new experiences and ideas
- Intellectually curious and have broad interests
- Receptive and open to change

2. Motivated, Willing and Desire to Change

- Strong internal drive and desire to learn, grow, and develop
- Constantly seek out and engage in new experiences in order to gain new knowledge and skills
- Enjoy the challenge and novelty of new experiences

3. Curious About Others

- Feel a powerful inner need to learn about people in other countries and other parts of the world
- Have a strong desire to understand the challenges other face and how they deal with the challenges
- Always searching for deeper understanding about the unique ways people in diverse settings and situations (e.g. roles, organizations, cultures) behave

4. Attitude of Discovery and Exploration

- Frequently seek out new, different situations in order to learn something new
- Often strike out into unfamiliar territory just for the adventure and enjoyment of experiencing something different
- Frequently discard old habits of mind and perceptions in order to view experiences with a fresh perspective

5. Intention and Willingness to Gain Something Positive from Experience

- Act with purpose and intention to learn something from every experience I have
- Even when an experience appears to be "negative" I search for meaning and value in the experience
- Typically look at unsatisfying/difficult situations as opportunities to gain valuable lessons and insights from experience

6. Belief in My Own Learning and Growth Potential

- Believe I am able to significantly grow and develop my knowledge, skills, and abilities
- Believe I can substantially change how much talent I have
- Always striving to gain new knowledge, develop new skills, and improve my abilities



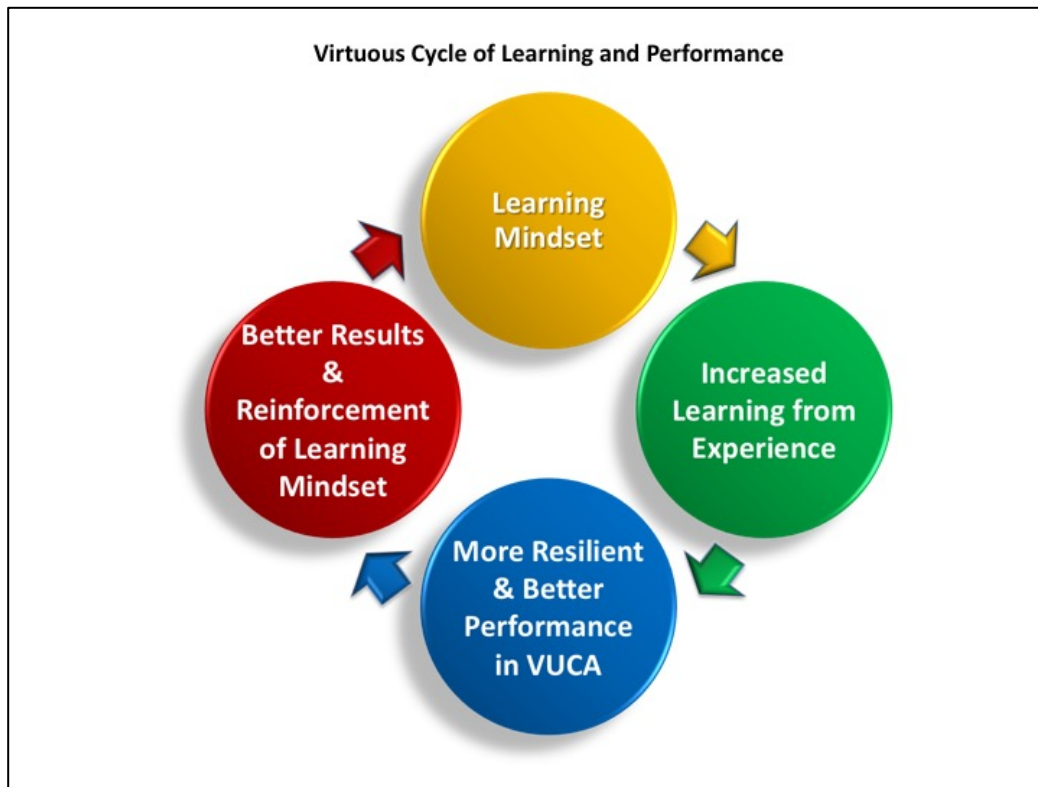
It's helpful to think of Learning Mindset as a set of prescription eyeglasses or lenses through which you view the world and your experience. If you operate with a mindset that leads you to view work projects or tasks *only* as things that you need to do in order to fulfill your job responsibilities and to succeed, then you will most likely focus *only* on producing the desired results "on time and under budget," using your current knowledge and skills to accomplish the goal. Now, these are good things to achieve. But operating with a Learning Mindset leads you to view those same work projects and tasks as opportunities to learn something new while achieving the desired outcomes. As a result, you will focus *both* on expanding your current knowledge and skills *and* taking creative action to produce the desired results. The conceptual lens of Learning Mindset leads you to see every experience as an opportunity to learn, grow, and develop.

Leaders who have a **Learning Mindset** see opportunities to learn in all aspects of their work life, and tend to learn more than those who are closed to learning. According to research conducted at the University of Virginia, "Managers with a 'learning mindset' are characterized by a continuous sense of ongoing learning and transformation and receive the highest job performance ratings of all those studied."⁴ And, in an article published by Harvard Business Review online, Gottfredson and Reina point out that "A learning mindset involves being motivated toward increasing one's competence and mastering something new.... Leaders with a learning mindset, compared to those with a performance mindset, are more mentally primed to increase their competence, engage in

⁴ L.A. Isabella and T. Forbes, "Managerial Mindsets Research Project: Executive Summary," Darden Graduate School of Business Administration, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, April 1994; and interview with the authors, 13 June 1994.



deep-level learning strategies, seek out feedback, and exert more of an effort. They are also persistent, adaptable, willing to cooperate, and tend to perform at a higher level.”⁵



In essence, fully embracing and enacting a Learning Mindset creates a “virtuous cycle” of learning and performance. The terms “virtuous cycle” and “vicious cycle” refer to “complex chains of events that reinforce themselves through a feedback loop.”⁶ A virtuous cycle generates favorable, or positive, results, while a vicious cycle produces detrimental results. The Learning Mindset creates this virtuous cycle because it enables leaders to learn more from their experiences, which in turn results in leaders being more resilient and performing better in VUCA conditions. This leads to achievement of better results and reinforces the importance and value of the Learning Mindset.

⁵ Ryan Gottfredson and Chris Reina, “To Be a Great Leader, You Need the Right Mindset.” Harvard Business Review digital article, January 17, 2020.

⁶ Virtuous circle and vicious circle. Wikipedia, sourced January 30, 2020.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtuous_circle_and_vicious_circle



Our research has led us to conclude that leaders who have a Learning Mindset demonstrate an attitude or stance toward learning that embodies openness to experience; are motivated, willing, and desire to learn; are highly curious about others and how they do what they do; possess an attitude of discovery and exploration; and show an intention and willingness to gain something positive from experience. As a result of this powerful constellation of learning-related attributes, these leaders experience more growth and development than leaders who do not have this attitude toward learning.

Additionally, their Learning Mindset leads them to consistently and intentionally demonstrate certain behaviors – “Learning Practices” – so that they are constantly seeking to learn from experience in every situation, and naturally apply what they learn in new, emerging experiences. You can accelerate your own development as a leader by applying the Learning Practices in your own life and work.

Do YOU have a Learning Mindset?

Take a few minutes to explore that question by completing the Learning Mindset Questionnaire, found in the Tools and Resources section.



THE LEARNING PRACTICES

“What can I do to ‘get better’ as a leader?” This is a question that leaders frequently ask after receiving 360-degree feedback or attending a training program. It’s one thing to know that you need to “think more strategically” or improve at “giving performance feedback and coaching” to your direct reports. It’s something completely different to translate that down to practical actions that you can take to bring about lasting change, growth, and development.

Learning Practices are actions you can take to accelerate and enhance your learning from experience. Your actions determine whether you proactively pursue learning in your day-to-day work life or focus only on getting the job done. Since most of us spend over 90% of our work time working, not in training programs or workshops, time on the job represents our best and most accessible opportunity to learn: from our day-to-day experience. We just need to know how to use our experience to grow and develop.

Most executives focus only on doing their jobs, producing results, and don’t *consciously, proactively* learn from your work experience. Given that, any learning that takes place is accidental, incidental, serendipitous, and frequently understood or implied without being stated. Even worse, some potential learning is left on the table due to neglect or failure to mine experience for lessons learned, insights gained, or skills reinforced. The opportunity and challenge is to diversify and consistently transform daily experience into learning and development. This is where the Learning Practices come in.



Leaders who consistently, intentionally, and rigorously use the Learning Practices learn significantly more, faster while achieving better results.

My research and experience, and an extensive review of the learning and leadership development literature, have revealed the following ten key learning practices that have significant potential for growing and accelerating your ability to learn from experience:

1. Take responsibility for your own learning and development
2. Seek and use feedback
3. Develop a clear understanding of your strengths and areas of development
4. Approach new assignments/opportunities with openness to experience and positive intention to learn
5. Ask great questions and demonstrate curiosity



6. Listen transformatively (intently, deeply, empathically)
7. Respond to experience with adaptability and flexibility
8. Actively reflect and practice mindfulness
9. Actively experiment with new approaches to learning
10. Closely observe and learn from others

The Learning Practices can be used in:

- Day-to-day work and life experience
- Assignments, projects, developmental opportunities
- Leadership development programs, to help leaders become better learners and better leaders
- Action Learning programs, to equip participants with knowledge, skills, and tools to learn from experience
- Coaching, to help coachees to become better learners and leaders, and to learn more, faster from experience

As you face the challenges of leading in today's world of increasing complexity, rapid change, and rising uncertainty, remember that the most effective leaders have the ability to transform their experiences into on-going growth and development. And the greater the challenge, the more significant is the opportunity to develop as a leader. If you have a **Learning Mindset** and consistently, intentionally, and rigorously put the **Learning Practices** into action, you will learn significantly more, faster, and as a result you'll perform at a higher level and create greater value for your company and for yourself.



TEN LEARNING PRACTICES

The following list of the ten Learning Practices and their descriptors (behaviors, behavioral trends and patterns, and tendencies) is provided as an overview of the practices and what they look like in action.

1. Take responsibility for your own learning and development

- Feel personally accountable to actively pursue your own professional growth and development
- Take the initiative to improve your leadership capabilities
- Develop goals and action plans to improve your knowledge and/or abilities related to your job or career
- Intentionally reframe your experiences to view them as learning opportunities
- Look for ways to learn something new while pursuing your work goals, assignments, and projects
- Persistently work through difficult issues and overcome obstacles to accomplish desired changes

2. Approach new assignments/opportunities with openness to experience and positive intention to learn

- Automatically think to yourself when you have a new assignment, “This is a great opportunity to learn something new”
- Welcome assignments to projects or tasks that you have never done before
- Look forward to different types of experiences because of the learning you might gain
- Find something useful to learn in most experiences
- Intentionally look for something to learn, even when an experience is difficult, challenging, or not to your liking

3. Seek and use feedback

- Ask colleagues (such as your direct manager/supervisor, peers, customers, stakeholders, and/or direct reports) for feedback about your performance, behaviors, and/or competencies
- Listen closely to the feedback you receive
- Follow up with and thank your colleagues for giving you useful feedback
- Listen closely to what might NOT be said (behind the words)
- Take feedback, both positive and constructive, to heart and do your best to use it to change, grow and develop

4. Develop a clear understanding of your strengths and areas of development



- Take stock of your personality characteristics, and how they influence your performance and behavior at work
 - Assess yourself against the leadership competencies in the competency model of your organization
 - Ask others to help you by sharing their perspective on your strengths and areas for further development
 - Identify your top strengths and top areas for further development
5. **Ask great questions / Curiosity**
- Ask open-ended questions to encourage people to expand their ideas and share them with you
 - Ask probing questions in order to learn more about something
 - Frame your questions positively
 - Ask questions from the Learning Mindset, seeking to learn rather than to judge
6. **Listen transformatively**
- Listen to others with the Learning Mindset, seeking to learn rather than to judge
 - Listen to explore your own perceptions, filters, and biases, and become aware of how they affect your behavior
 - Listen intently, deeply, empathically
 - Listen to understand both the content and the affect of the speaker
 - Listen to grasp the intentions and deeper purpose of the speaker, i.e., what they want to achieve
7. **Respond to experience with adaptability and flexibility**
- Change your behavior according to the situation at hand
 - Resist the tendency to use “muscle memory” (old, familiar ways of leading and acting) and proactively choose my actions depending on the circumstance
 - Not insisting on your own way, even when you have “been there, done that” and think you know the “right” way
 - Soliciting others’ ideas about how to handle situations, especially those from different cultural backgrounds and life experiences
8. **Actively reflect / Practice mindfulness**
- Take the time to reflect on and think about situations you have been in at work, what your behavior was, how you were feeling, what the outcome was, and any insight or lesson you gained
 - Actively reflect during situations, so that you self-direct or self-correct and make changes to your behavior or words that bring about a more desirable outcome
 - Reflect with others to gain an appreciation for their perspective and to broaden your awareness



- Maintain a high degree of awareness of the people, actions, interactions, and dynamics around you, in order to make sense of situations and experiences as they occur
- Pay attention to the present moment; watch your thoughts with detachment and without judgment

9. Actively experiment with new approaches

- Frequently try different approaches to solving problems
- Play around with different ways of presenting an idea you have
- Brainstorm with colleagues new ways of doing what you have done for years

10. Observe and learn from others

- Train yourself to become a better observer
- Seek out someone who is known to be an expert at something you want to learn about, and interview them about how they learned it themselves
- Identify someone who has a Learning Mindset and who uses many of the Learning Practices; ask them about their learning journey and how they developed their skills at learning from experience
- Identify someone who is recognized as an outstanding leader or specialist, and “shadow” them to learn first-hand how they do what they do; interview them to learn more
- Work with a small group of leaders to learn from them and build a supportive social network that provides both motivation and accountability for learning