

Mindset

Maybe the way you see the problem is the problem.

Two friends are driving across the country. Two thousand miles in, somewhere in the mountains of South Dakota, one asks the other what all the roadside signs with the Chinese character on them mean. He is looking at the symbol for a picnic table. This session is about misreading the signs, and about what to do once you suspect you might be.

A mindset is the settled set of attitudes and beliefs you see through. It is a lens, and a lens can be clear, blurred, or distorted. Mindset shapes what you think, thought shapes what you feel, and feeling sets much of the quality of a life.

Here is the difficulty. Nobody can change your lens for you. Being told you are wrong does not do it, and few of us enjoy the telling. So the only question that matters is whether you can notice your own lens and decide to change it.

Being wrong feels like being right

- In the abstract everyone agrees that to err is human. In the present tense, in the meeting or at the dinner table or in the comment thread, we feel entirely correct about everything.
- Ask a room what it feels like to be wrong and you get sickening, shameful, revelatory. Those are answers to a different question: what it feels like to *realize* you are wrong.
- Before the realization you are the cartoon coyote past the edge of the cliff and before he looks down. Already wrong, standing on nothing, feeling fine.
- Dunning and Kruger, 1999: people hold overly favorable views of their own abilities, and the least skilled are the least equipped to notice. Nearly nobody places themselves below average at anything.

Two reasons we stay in the bubble

Ignorance, meaning a lack of awareness rather than stupidity. The coyote before he looks down. The sun went around the earth. Disease came from bad air. Bleeding a patient helped. Washing your hands between the dissection room and the delivery room was an unnecessary fuss.

Arrogance. A woman in Boston went in for an orthopedic procedure. She woke and found the bandages on the wrong leg, although the correct leg had been marked before surgery. The hospital's quality officer explained it plainly: for whatever reason, the surgeon simply felt he was on the correct side of the patient. Feeling right beat being right. It is also worth asking whether anyone else in that room felt able to say something.

The dangerous combination is both at once. And we are trained into it early, because school teaches that wrong equals bad. A wrong answer is a failing grade. A changed position in public life makes you a flip-flopper. So we hide errors, build armor, call it high standards, and pay for it later.

Growth mindset

Carol Dweck's idea: ability is developed, not issued.

- The fixed version speaks in permanent sentences. I have always been overweight, it is just who I am. Weights are for young men. I am not good with money. I am not good with technology. I could never learn a language.
- Sometimes that is a sincere belief. Sometimes it is a convenient excuse for a skill you would rather not acquire. Dividing labor by preference is fine. Putting up a permanent wall so you never have to learn is not.
- Laura Ingalls Wilder published her first book at 65. Anna Mary Robertson Moses took up painting in her late seventies when arthritis ended her embroidery, and was exhibiting internationally in her eighties. Fauja Singh ran his first marathon at 89 and his last one past 100. Julia Child began learning to cook at 37 and went on television at 51.
- The single move that does the most work is replacing "I can't" with "not yet."
- The rest: value effort over talent, treat setbacks as information, ask for criticism and act on some of it, and set process goals rather than outcome goals.

Scout mindset

Julia Galef's idea: wanting your map to match the ground.

- The soldier is in combat. Beliefs are positions to defend, arguments are attacks, and changing your mind is surrender. Look at the language we already use without noticing: well-grounded, deep-rooted, fortified, poke holes, shoot down, knock-down argument, concede.
- The scout is out mapping. What is over that hill? Is the bridge there or not? Finding out he was wrong improves the map, which is the entire job. He has no interest in drawing a bridge where there is no bridge, because he may have to cross it.

- Motivated reasoning is soldier mindset, and it is the natural state. If you never catch yourself in it, the likeliest explanation is not that you are free of it.

How to change a lens

- **Want to.** None of this happens by accident, and a small amount of desire is enough to start.
- **Study it.** The purpose of learning is to evolve your beliefs, not to confirm them.
- **Practice intellectual humility.** Admit the limits out loud. The most useful position available is confident and uncertain at the same time.
- **Speak in degrees.** Might be, could be, it appears that, rather than is. The habit of language becomes a habit of thought.
- **Keep open-minded skepticism.** Open to new ideas, still asking for evidence, willing to withhold judgment until there is enough of it.
- **Make updating routine.** The word comes from Bayesian reasoning, where you adjust confidence as evidence arrives. Treat it as arithmetic rather than as conceding a point, and ask in advance what evidence would change your mind.

Three thought experiments that force the issue:

- **The outsider test.** How would someone with no history in this decision see it? An experienced investor with no attachment to your venture.
- **The steelman.** Build the strongest version of the opposing case, not the weakest. If you believe in a diet, make the best case against it.
- **The future self.** Look back on this decision from twenty years out and ask what that person would say. Unusually effective with teenagers.

Two people who changed their lens

The filmmaker

Cassie Jaye set out to make a documentary exposing the men's rights movement, with the film's argument decided before she started. She spent a year interviewing its members, changed her mind about parts of what she found, and released a different film than the one she planned. It cost her most of the audience she came from.

The musician

Daryl Davis, a Black musician, has spent decades in conversation with members of the Ku Klux Klan. His question is how can you hate me when you do not even know me. Many of the men he befriended eventually left and handed him their robes. He did not argue them out of it. He listened first.

Neither of them was talked out of a position. Both looked through their own lens, decided it was distorted, and changed it. That is the only route there is.

TRY THIS

- Name one area where you hold a fixed mindset, then write the "not yet" version of the sentence.
- Keep a running list of things you turned out to be wrong about.
- Name a person who disagrees with you and whom you consider thoughtful. If you cannot, that is the finding.
- Steelman one belief you hold strongly.
- Tell someone you have realized they were right.

You have to listen in order to learn. Seek first to understand.

Resources

Questions that cultivate a scout mindset

- Do I tell people when I realize they were right?
- How do I react to personal criticism? Can I point to criticism I actually acted on? Have I ever rewarded a critic?
- Do I ever prove myself wrong?
- Do I decide in advance what will count as success and what will count as failure, so I cannot move the goalposts afterward?
- Can I name people critical of my beliefs, profession, or life choices whom I consider thoughtful, even while believing they are mistaken?
- Can I list reasons someone might reasonably disagree with me?
- Can I point to an occasion when I was clearly in soldier mindset?

Referenced in this session

- Unskilled and unaware of it, Dunning and Kruger, 1999.
- Kathryn Schulz, on what being wrong feels like.
- Carol Dweck, on fixed and growth mindsets.
- Julia Galef, on soldier and scout.
- Cassie Jaye, documentary filmmaker.
- Daryl Davis, musician.

Reading

- *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, Kathryn Schulz. Where most of the first half of this session comes from.
- *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Carol Dweck. Fixed and growth, at length.
- *The Scout Mindset*, Julia Galef. Why some people see clearly and others do not.
- *Think Again*, Adam Grant. The pleasure of finding out you were wrong.

Watch

- Kathryn Schulz, "On being wrong."
- Carol Dweck, "The power of believing that you can improve."
- Julia Galef, "Why you think you're right, even if you're wrong."
- Adam Grant, "What frogs in hot water can teach us about thinking again."

Theme: thinking well. From my course *Think Better*. The companion sessions are on discernment, mind traps, and mental models.