

# Ability? Effort? Or Mindset?

Successful people have several things in common: they love learning, seek challenges, value effort, and persevere even when things become difficult.<sup>i</sup> They demonstrate both ability and effort. These two things are the basic requirements for success.

Many people think ability is more important than effort. Either you have it or you don't. But here's a new way of thinking about the question. Take the notion of genius, for example. Experts used to think that a genius was someone born with extraordinary talent, like Mozart. From an early age, geniuses demonstrate exceptional natural abilities, they thought. But experts have changed their thinking: "What Mozart had, we now believe, was . . . the ability to focus for long periods of time. The key factor separating geniuses from the merely accomplished is not a divine spark . . . It's deliberate practice. Top performers spend more hours (many more hours) rigorously practicing their craft." A master violinist once said, "I practice the violin eight hours a day for 40 years, and they call me a genius?" Effort counts much more than you might think.<sup>ii</sup>

That said, think about some of the possible combinations of ability and effort. If you have high ability and exert great effort, you'll most likely succeed. If you have high ability and exert little effort and fail, you can always claim you didn't have the time to invest or you didn't care, right? You can always say that you could have done well if you'd tried harder. Rationalizing can lead to a dangerous strategy, one that's called "self-handicapping."<sup>iii</sup> Some college students actually consciously or unconsciously apply this strategy. They exert little effort, perhaps because they have no confidence in themselves or because they fear

failure, and then they rationalize when they don't do well.

Research shows that what you *believe* about your own intelligence—your *mindset*—can make a difference in how successful you'll be in college. At first glance this statement seems absurd. What does what you believe about intelligence have to do with how smart you really are?

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## Theories of Intelligence Scale

|                |              |       |          |                 |                   |
|----------------|--------------|-------|----------|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1              | 2            | 3     | 4        | 5               | 6                 |
| Strongly Agree | Mostly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Mostly Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

- \_\_\_1. You have a certain amount of intelligence, and you can't really do much to change it.
  - \_\_\_2. You can learn new things, but you can't really change your basic intelligence.
  - \_\_\_3. You can always substantially change how intelligent you are.
  - \_\_\_4. No matter how much intelligence you have, you can always change it quite a bit.
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The scaled questions [above] demonstrate that there are two basic ways to define intelligence. Some of us are *performers*, who agree with statements 1 and 2, while others of us are *learners*, who agree more with statements 3 and 4. *Performers* believe that intelligence is a fixed trait that cannot be changed. From the moment you're born, you have a certain amount of intelligence that's been allotted to you, and that's that. *Learners*, on the other hand, believe you can grow your intelligence if you capitalize on opportunities to learn. Whenever you tackle a tough challenge, you learn from it. The more you learn, the more intelligent you can become. Understanding which view of intelligence you endorse will make a difference in how you approach your college classes, as well as the outcomes—positive and negative—that you'll achieve.

These two contrasting views of intelligence have been revealed through the research of Dr. Carol Dweck of Stanford University, her graduate students, and other social psychologists. Some of their original work began with children, who were first asked to agree or disagree with questions similar to those you just answered to determine which view of intelligence they held. Afterward, they were given eight conceptual problems to solve, problems that were appropriate for their grade level. As they worked on the problems, the researchers asked them to talk aloud about whatever was on their minds, even if it was unrelated to the actual problems. After they had solved the first eight problems successfully, they were given four additional problems that were far too difficult for them to solve. This is where their views about the nature of intelligence made a difference.

As they tried to tackle the problems that were too difficult for them, the *performers* talked about feeling helpless. They became discouraged and anxious, forgot that they had solved the first eight problems successfully, and told themselves they weren't very smart. The *learners*, on the other hand, coached themselves on how to do better, remained optimistic, and actually improved their problem-solving strategies. They wanted to master what they were working on. To *learners*, academic challenges were opportunities for growth; to *performers* academic challenges were threats that might reveal their deficiencies. Performance is about measuring ability, "trying to convince yourself and others that you have a royal flush when you're secretly worried it's a pair of tens."<sup>iv</sup> Learning is about investing the effort required to master new things: "Why waste time proving over and over how great you are, when you could be getting better?"<sup>v</sup>

Sometimes students who are highly confident are *performers*. They've always been told they're smart, and they have an image to protect. They become focused on the possibility

of failure, which they need to avoid at all costs, instead of developing strategies to help them succeed. If you believe you only have a certain amount of intelligence, whether you realize it or not, your goal in college may be to prove you have enough. When you come to a tough course, you think, "If I have to work hard at this, I must not be very good at it." But if you believe you can develop your intelligence through learning, your goal will be to increase your ability: "If I have to work hard at this, eventually I'll become *very* good at it." Note that the research is not claiming that everyone is equally intelligent. That's not true, but what is true is that for any given individual, intellectual capacity can be increased with effort and guidance. Think of college as your opportunity to do that. According to Dweck, just learning about the importance of mindset can make a difference. Truly mastering something takes more sustained effort; performing can simply be an easy way out. Learners are more likely to be intrinsically motivated; performers love the "cheering of the crowd"—external approval. Mindset matters, perhaps more than you've ever even considered.

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“Ho imparato che niente è impossibile, e anche che quasi niente è facile. . .”  
(I've learned that nothing is impossible, and that almost nothing is easy. . .)

Articolo 31 (Italian rap group)

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Let's admit it: We live in a performance-based society. Getting good grades is what it's all about, we're told. We all want to do well, look good, appear smart, and impress others. Did your previous schooling emphasize the performance mindset? Do you come from a family that overemphasizes grades? Are your

parents putting extra pressure on you because they never had the chance to go to college? Are you from an underrepresented population on campus and because of this you feel performance pressure to succeed?<sup>vi</sup> That's normal, but your view of intelligence can be changed, and changing it may be your key to academic success. There is evidence that students who are taught the value of a learning mindset over a performance mindset can actually achieve more than students who aren't.<sup>vii</sup>

Regardless of what you believe about your precise intelligence level, the fact is this: *intelligence can be cultivated through learning.* And people's theories about their intelligence levels can be shifted.

**Excerpted from Constance Staley's *Focus on College Success* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), pp. 16–19.**

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<sup>i</sup> Dweck, C. S. (2000). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality, and development*. New York: Psychology Press, p. 1.

<sup>ii</sup> Brooks, D. (2009, May 1). Genius: The modern view. *The New York Times*. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/01/opinion/01brooks.html>.

<sup>iii</sup> Berglas, S. & Jones, E. E. (1978). Drug choice as a self-handicapping strategy in response to noncontingent success. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36, 405–417; Jones, E. E. & Berglas, S. (1978). Control of attributions about the self through self-handicapping strategies: The appeal of alcohol and the role of underachievement. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 4, 200–206;

Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.

<sup>iv</sup> Dweck, *Mindset*, 7.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>vi</sup> Fischer, M. (2007, March-April). Settling into campus life; Differences by race-ethnicity in college involvement and outcomes. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 78(2), 125–161.

<sup>vii</sup> Dweck, C. S. (2000). *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality, and development*. New York: Psychology Press; Dweck, *Mindset*.