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*This newsletter features topics related to managing change and improving our work environments. If there are topics you would like to see covered or feedback you have about this newsletter, please submit your ideas and feedback to the following link: <http://www.anneoffner.com/contact.htm>*

When the going gets tough, the tough get going. So they say. As hard as we work we are bound to go through periods in which we have a personal challenge or two that distract us from work. In my career I've watched as colleagues trudged through work during times of illness, divorce, challenges with their children, or other family crises. People travel differently through such periods. Just handling personal crises can be enough but when you add economic or job-related challenges, the challenge can seem daunting.

According to what we are hearing from the newscasters and reading in the newspapers, 2008 promises to bring a variety of potential worries. The economy is teetering on the edge of recession. Homeowners and other good citizens are cash-strapped and spending less. The stock market is waxing and waning. The Fed made an "emergency" adjustment to interest rates on January 22<sup>nd</sup> and another planned adjustment just a week later. Investors are scratching their heads as they themselves teeter between anxiety and exasperation. The elections are another big topic – with change comes uncertainty and so we shall see, come

November, what there is to really worry about.

When the "whole world" seems to be in chaos, my training tells me it's time to get centered on what we can ourselves control. If you, a colleague, or a loved one is experiencing the double- or triple-whammy of personal, professional, or economic crises right now perhaps a look at ways to center ourselves and gain control will be useful.



**Fixed or Malleable?** Carol Dweck is a researcher who was recently mentioned in the Wall Street Journal.<sup>i</sup> She is also the author of the book *Mindset: The new Psychology of Success*.<sup>ii</sup> She says that she was compelled to write the book because she believes her research explains why we might "back down" from a difficult situation or face it head-on.

She believes that from an early age we learn to approach challenges from either a growth or a "fixed" standpoint. If you have a fixed standpoint, you will want to "wallow in your success and disown your failures rather than rectify them."<sup>iii</sup> If a fixed person makes a mistake at work, he is more likely to place blame elsewhere or compare

himself to others who have made “even worse” mistakes. On the other hand, a person who has a growth mindset will seek to understand the part he played in making the mistake and determine how he can be successful next time.

The crux of the issue seems to be whether we believe that our natural intelligence, gifts, and talents are fixed or malleable. If we believe these things are fixed then we tend to think that we are special or better than other people are. When we make comparisons to our own accomplishments we tend to seek out targets that have accomplished less to reinforce our perception that we are “special.” This also serves to limit our desire to learn and grow because we focus on protecting what we perceive to be as our limited reserve of intelligence, talent, etc.

Those who believe that they can grow their talent, intelligence, etc., seek to compare themselves to their equals or those who have achieved greater things in life. They also fundamentally believe that they can grow and learn. These folks tend to stride “head-on” into a challenge with a degree of patience with their attempts that “fixed” folks don’t have. This patience comes from their belief that if they fail it doesn’t define their abilities or prove to the world that they are limited. It is instead an opportunity to learn.

The good news for those with a “fixed” mindset – with awareness and encouragement - they can learn too.

Dweck’s book is a quick and fascinating read. It offers insight for how we might unleash old habits in the workplace or in our personal lives. She is also a Developmental Psychologist and so much of what she writes will be interesting to those with children as well.



In my April, 2007 newsletter I talked about Martin Seligman, the researcher who has a lot of good guidance for optimists and pessimists. Seligman has found that some individuals routinely interpret the causes of bad events differently from others. Some folks tend to attribute events that they perceive as negative to their own doing (e.g., “It’s my fault” or “I knew this would happen if I took this job”). These folks often see situations as unending (e.g., stable, ongoing situations that are not likely to improve). Additionally they tend to think globally about the situation (e.g., “This is going to ruin my life” or “This change is going to undercut everything I’ve worked for.”).

According to his research, people who have these habits in their thinking will be more susceptible to feeling helpless, discouraged, and de-motivated than people who tend to have a more optimistic outlook on situations.

According to Seligman, optimists tend to see situations they perceive as negative in the opposite way that the pessimists do. For an optimist, a downsizing or restructuring will be viewed as temporary (e.g., “This is an opportunity to find a job I really enjoy” or “By this time next year, this will blow over.”). They also tend to see negatives situations in a more specific, focused way than pessimists (e.g., “Yes, I made a mistake and was fired from my last job but I’ve been able to prove myself in my new job.”). Finally optimists tend not to place the blame for bad events on themselves and tend not to reduce their own sense of self-worth (“I was downsized because the business is changing and my skills need some polishing up” or “These

things happen in today's corporate environment.”)

Seligman's book *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*<sup>iv</sup> has great tips for anyone – optimists and pessimists alike. Pessimists can certainly retrain their way of thinking to help them better cope with negative events. Their managers can coach them to think through alternative ways of seeing the situation. Seligman also points out that there is value in pessimism. For example, pessimists tend to be more realistic in their view of situations. Optimists can get caught in the trap of being idealistic or missing crucial messages about their own behavior.

The important message for pessimists is to learn a new set of beliefs. Instead of jumping to the conclusion that a downsizing was attributable to their own lack of skills or ability Seligman would point out that it's healthier and more productive to look at external cues as well (e.g., the company's financial viability, a bad break but not something that's likely to be

repeated, etc.). This can help a person to maintain a sense of self-worth and realistically view his or her strengths during challenging times of transition.



**In Summary.** Whether we face challenges head-on, dip our toe into the water, or hide our head in the sand, when crisis happens we can find a sense of control by examining our habits and reaching out to colleagues, friends, or loved ones to help us adjust our mindset. We bring our cars in for periodic tune-ups to keep them running well - so why not treat our brains in the same manner? It's a good investment because - unlike cars - we appreciate in value!

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**This newsletter is edited by Larry Offner of West Palm Beach, Florida.**

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<sup>i</sup> Sandberg, Jared. *Why Learn and Grow On the Job? It's Easier To Feign Infallibility*. Wall Street Journal. (Eastern edition). New York, N.Y.: Jan 22, 2008. pg. B.1

<sup>ii</sup> Dweck, Carol (2007). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. NY: Ballentine Books.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, Sandberg, Jared (2008).

<sup>iv</sup> Seliman, Martin (1990). *Learned Optimism*. NY: Pocket Books.