

# Can People Really Change?

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A common topic in the workplace is employee performance. Most companies formally assess employee performance at least once a year, but conversations about performance occur daily. Some are positive discussions about people exceeding expectations, but others are about people falling short of expectations. Regarding the latter, you hear comments like “he just doesn’t get it”, “she always makes mistakes”, or “he doesn’t have the skill we need.”

Yet, as important as people’s performance is to an organization, how managers handle it is more important. Some managers do nothing which creates issues for them and the person, as well as the team and overall organization. For managers who take action, a poor choice can be even worse. They might invest in people who don’t justify it or fire people who should not be fired.

Managers’ choices about what to do with underperforming employees come down to one basic question, “do they believe people can change?” Managers who think people’s performance is fixed fundamentally believe people cannot change. They have a *fixed mindset*. Managers who think people can learn, grow, and change have a *growth mindset* (*fixed* and *growth* terms popularized by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck).

What do fixed-mindset managers say about their employees when they underperform? Something like “he can’t do the job, so I’m going to fire him and hire someone else who can.” It is no surprise that these managers often have a history of repeated hiring and firing.

If you think these managers are the exception, consider these US Bureau of Labor Statistics. The number of employees fired or laid off in 2016 was 19,965,000. That was an average of 54,549 people laid off or fired every day, including weekends and holidays. That was approximately 13% of the US workforce. That included the release of seasonal workers, but it is a staggering number nonetheless. In the first two months of 2017, a total of 3,243,000 people were laid off or fired which was an average of 54,966 per day, a slight increase over 2016.

Consider the disruption that firing and laying off causes. It is like repeatedly scrapping something that you have been working on and starting over. It is also costly. By some estimates, replacing professional workers averages 1-2 times their salary. In other words, for employees who earn \$100K/year, an organization spends \$100-200K to recruit, interview, select, hire, onboard, and train new people to be at the level of proficiency of the people they replace. Not to mention the impact on team dynamics and workload distribution.

Is there a better way to deal with underperformance? Do managers and leaders have other options? Of course. They can develop people instead of replace them, but often managers don’t because they do not give people a reasonable chance. They fundamentally don’t think people can change. They have a fixed mindset.

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Consider how absurd it is to think that people cannot change. If people can't change, we didn't learn anything from our parents. Or school. Or anywhere. We were all born doctors, lawyers, engineers, managers, athletes, musicians, or whatever we are. All training is a scam.

To be clear about what we were born with and what we were not, neuroscience finds that our genes do determine many of our physical traits, although not 100 percent. Even our height is only about 90 percent heritable. What we eat, drink, inhale, do, and even think determines the other 10 percent. Our intelligence is about 50 percent heritable; our personalities are 20-40 percent. The rest of our attributes are primarily learned including our beliefs, values, attitudes, styles, biases, knowledge, and skills.

So people do learn and therefore can change. They grow and develop into subject matter experts. They become better decision makers, presenters, and team players. They quit smoking, start exercising, and lose weight. They become more personable and likable. They become better managers and leaders. They become better writers, project managers, engineers, lawyers, and equipment operators.

Of course not all become better because not all make the choice to do so, but the choice is theirs. If people have the resources, have the opportunity, choose to learn, and apply what they learn, they can change. They can become virtually whatever they want aside from physical limitations. People's ability to change has been well studied and proven.

If you are a manager of people, consider your mindset regarding people's ability to change. Adopt a growth mindset and give people a chance to grow. If they choose not to, then move them into a different role or out, but only after giving them reasonable time, attention, and coaching. Avoid the costly and disruptive cycle of repeated firing and hiring.

If dealing with your own underperformance, or helping someone else with theirs, realize that your genes and past do not have to define you or your future. You can grow and change. Identify and engage the resources you need. Request help. Craft a development plan that includes research, training, reading, and special assignments. Invest in yourself. Gain the experience you need and enjoy growing into the best you can be.

As contemporary author Brian Herbert said, "The capacity to learn is a gift; The ability to learn is a skill; The willingness to learn is a choice." Even the famous 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian artist Michelangelo, at the age of 87, said "I am still learning." So can you, if you choose to do so.

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