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HAWAII NEWS

Author to offer ideas on motivating employees

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"It's important for people to realize they have no idea what their potential is."

Carol S. Dweck

Stanford psychologist and author

Stanford psychology professor Carol S. Dweck, whose groundbreaking book “Mindset” changed the way many parents praise their kids, credits fifth-graders for teaching her about motivation and dealing with failure.

A precocious child, she was wary of “not looking smart.” But some of the kids she studied early in her career seemed to relish tasks that tripped them up.

“It amazed me,” she said. “Some of those 10-year-olds were excited when I gave them problems they couldn’t solve that were too hard for them. They thought, ‘Now it’s worth my while.’ And I thought, ‘Wait a minute, they’re failing, how can they possibly welcome this?’”

Her findings from decades of research on what motivates students — and how praising their intelligence can backfire — are being applied in homes, schools and even workplaces. Dweck is headed to Honolulu as the keynote speaker at the Hawaii Wellness Leaders Conference on Nov. 16 sponsored by Hawaii Health at Work Alliance, a partnership of more than 300 local companies and organizations.

Her speech at the conference is titled “Develop the Right Mindset and Grow Your Organization.” Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, who took over the company in 2014, cites Dweck and her book “Mindset,” which has been translated into 20 languages, as an inspiration in his efforts to shift the company culture toward a “growth mindset.”

Dweck coined the terms “fixed mindset” and “growth mindset” to distill two basic attitudes she and her colleagues discovered through experiments with children.

“Some children tend to believe that their abilities, talents and intelligence are fixed traits — you have a certain amount and that’s it,” she said in a phone interview. “We call this a fixed mindset. But other children tend more toward the view that abilities, talents and intelligence can be developed your whole life through hard work, and not just hard work, but good strategies and lots of input and mentoring from others.”

Those attitudes can have a long-term effect. A parent or teacher who praises children for being “so smart” can unwittingly sap their drive. Children might opt out of a challenge because they’d rather continue to look intelligent than be embarrassed. A student with a fixed mindset can be easily discouraged. Setbacks tend to shake their self-image.

But praising effort and exploring how a child tackled a problem, and other possible strategies, can have the opposite effect. The brain is like a muscle that grows with exercise, Dweck says. Kids with a “growth mindset,” who are willing to persist and try different approaches, tend to go further. And even people with a fixed mindset can

shift their outlook, by stretching themselves and learning from others and from their own mistakes.

“Mindsets can be changed,” Dweck said. “A big part of our research is about developing programs that can teach a growth mindset.”

Dweck, who earned her Ph.D. at Yale in 1972 and taught at Columbia University for many years, has won numerous awards for her research delving into motivation, emotion and cognition. Most recently she received the 2016 Atkinson Prize in Psychological and Cognitive Science from the National Academy of Science, a \$100,000 award honoring significant advances in the field.

“I started on this line of work when I was in graduate school,” she said, “because I was so curious about why some children relished challenges and thrived in the face of obstacles when other children who were just as skilled, just as able, avoided challenges, ran from mistakes or crumpled in the face of failure.”

That curiosity stemmed in part from an experience in her own childhood: “Because our sixth-grade teacher had seated us around the room in IQ order, I became very sensitive to the idea of being smart and never saying anything where you wouldn’t look smart,” she said.

So she was especially intrigued by the fifth-graders she later studied who embraced challenges without fear of making mistakes.

“I was so far from that at the time,” Dweck recalls. “Probably that’s why I was studying it — because failure wasn’t something I was comfortable with. ... I thought, wow, I have a lot to learn from these kids. And they became my role models.”

She added, “It’s important for people to realize they have no idea what their potential is. Nothing they’ve ever done, no test they’ve ever taken, can tell them what their potential is in the future if they dedicate themselves to something important to them.”

For more information about the conference, visit [hhawa.com](http://www.hawa.com).

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