

Ep #14: Learner's Mindset



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With Your Host

Ellie Frey Zagel

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Ep #14: Learner's Mindset

This is episode 14. Today I'm talking about adopting a learner's mindset.

Welcome to *The Family Business Leader Podcast*. A podcast for multigenerational family business leaders who want to become the leader they were meant to be. If you're ready to learn how to develop your own authentic leadership style, successfully lead your family business and create your own lasting legacy while still honoring theirs this is the podcast for you. I'm your host, Ellie Frey Zagel, family business leadership coach and third-generation family business leader. Let's get to it.

Hello my friends. How are you? I hope you're doing so well today. Today I'm going to talk about adopting a learner's mindset. And this episode is for you if you've ever been told to not fail because everyone would know it if you did. But deep down you know that by not failing, you are also not reaching your potential. Definitely stay tuned. We're going to dive into some stories, some my own, some of my clients and then talk about the coaching on the other side of it.

Before I do that I just have to share with you one thing. So, a couple of weeks ago I went flyfishing in this gorgeous, gorgeous river and took out my back. And by took out my back I don't mean that literally. But the next day I woke up and I could not move. I was stuck in bed for a week and a half. I couldn't see clients because I do all of my coaching work on video. And so, I had to cancel everything. I've never had to do that before. And I went to physical therapy five times during that week and a half. I am feeling so much better. I am walking again. I couldn't walk.

Basically, my shoulders went one way and my hips went another way and rotated. And I was a mess, that's a direct quote from my physical therapist who was amazing and put me back together. But I think this is relevant because during this time, instead of really feeling sorry for myself, which I did. I did feel a little sorry for myself. But I also took the time to learn about why I was in this situation. So, I took responsibility for what was happening to my body and really went deep inside and said, "Okay, what is going on?"

Ep #14: Learner's Mindset

So, I got very, very curious. And this is related to what I'm teaching today because curiosity is one of those emotions that if you can get to really can help you lead in a much more powerful way. So, before I really get into that I just want to share another story with you. So, growing up we had family game night. And for me it was a really painful experience. I hated to lose. I have always seemed to have been this way. I just don't like losing. And I liken losing to failing.

And so, unless I was winning at games with my family I was always thinking that they were better than me or I wasn't good enough. I wasn't worthy enough to win. I wasn't lucky enough sometimes. I had to win. Winning meant that just the opposite of what I just said, is that I was better, or more worthy, or luckier. So, you can see how if I didn't win then I would get very upset. Okay, this is when I'm young. Don't judge me. It wasn't like it was last year. But I would often leave the table if I was losing.

I know my siblings, I'm one of five, so I know my siblings can definitely remember this. If I was losing especially to a sibling I would just be like, "This is ridiculous", and sometimes leave mid game. Sometimes I would quit during the game and sometimes I would quit before the next hand. I would just get up and go. I was just like, "I'm done." It was never just a game to me. And of course not, if I'm thinking winning makes me more worthy, or luckier, or better in some way, then losing meant I wasn't good enough, or not deserving enough, or not worthy enough.

And the trend continued into school too, this mindset continued. It wasn't just family game night. It was also at school. A's meant that I was more then, that I was smarter, that I was harder working than others. And at home I was rewarded with attention and attention when I showed up with good grades. So, it wasn't until my early 30s I realized something wasn't working, so not that long ago. But I didn't know what it was. I felt un-coachable. I wanted to do things my way but I wasn't getting the results that I wanted so I really wanted help but I had no idea how to get that help.

Ep #14: Learner's Mindset

I felt I had potential inside but I couldn't get it out. I craved mentorship but I was unable to be totally honest and vulnerable with what I needed help with. I didn't even necessarily know what I needed help with. I just knew that things weren't working. I went through some group coaching programs and really started diving into authenticity work at this time. And then I read Carol Dweck's book on mindset. And it was like this missing piece fell into place. So, in her book, Dweck explains the difference between a fixed mindset and growth mindset.

And Carol Dweck, for those of you who don't know her is a Stanford University psychologist. She was at Stanford. She was at Columbia I believe. Her book is *Mindset, The New Psychology of Success: How we Can Learn to Fulfill our Potential*. And if you haven't read it yet it's amazing. So, she describes the difference between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. And basically, in chapter two I realized, it became very, very clear to me that I was somebody who grew up in a fixed mindset.

And my fixed mindset was clearly showing up on game night and in school with grades. And I have these mantras inside me. Maybe you can relate, don't lose, don't fail. As I mentioned in the intro I was told not to fail because if I failed it would be public. And reading between the lines if you fail publicly that would be mortifying. You wouldn't be a success if you failed publicly. And so, my mindset was always like get the good grades, achieve, win the games, be the best I could be, strive for perfection.

And I did things to achieve because I thought achievement meant somehow I would be a better person. And unfortunately, what I realize now is as a result of my fixed mindset I didn't learn necessarily in my classes. I just memorized things and regurgitated it on the tests because if I got an A, all that mattered was getting the A on the test. And if I got an A I was somehow, as I've already mentioned, more worthy, better than. In many families who are in the public eye we are told growing up, "Don't fail, if you do everyone will know."

Ep #14: Learner's Mindset

And so, I would play it safe like so many others, so many of my clients who will just play it safe, we did not raise our hand to ask questions. For me I wanted to look smart. So, I just didn't ask any questions because if I just didn't ask any questions people wouldn't know that I totally did not get whenever the teacher was teaching. And so, I would just be like, "Okay, I can just read the book and I'll figure it out." And that sometimes worked and sometimes didn't. When I was young I didn't explore new things, or I gave up when the learning became more advanced.

I didn't listen to myself and I definitely second guessed myself. Instead, I often listened to others, I'd get their opinion before I formed my own. I didn't trust my own opinion. So, through college, through my 20s, I kind of stayed small. I lacked confidence in some areas. I grew entitled in other areas. I didn't take risks because failing wasn't an option. And I basically shorted my potential. And what was really interesting is I actually didn't know how to ask questions.

And I realized that, in my 20s I was dating a man. And he was a question asker. And I was just so amazed by his ability to shoot out of his seat, ask any questions even if it was most pedantic. He was not afraid to ask anything. And I was like, "Oh my gosh, he's so brave. I could never be like that." I just kind of looked at him like he was an alien almost because I've never been around somebody who was just so fearless when asking questions. He did not care if it made him look stupid. He did not care what other people thought of him.

All he wanted to know was the answer so he could learn. And also, when I was in this fixed mindset, so I not only did I not know how to ask questions, and it was just so weird to even think about. For some reason my brain would just be like, I don't know how to do that. I don't know how to ask questions. What's a good question? I also feared the judgment of others. As I just mentioned, I feared the judgement, somebody would be like, "She's not as smart as I thought she was." Or, "She's not as capable. She's asking this type of question."

Ep #14: Learner's Mindset

So, I just shut down, didn't put myself out there. But many of my clients come to me saying, "There's something inside, I'm made for more." I too could feel that I was made for more. There was something deep inside and something just didn't feel right. This way of just playing small, this fixed mindset which I later realized was called a fixed mindset, was just not working for me any longer. Maybe it never worked for me.

And so, like so many of my clients I began to do the work. And I got coaching. I found group coaching programs, like masterminds. And I started to put myself out there and learned how to ask questions and forgave myself for stumbling over questions. I remember that I would challenge myself to ask a question in big arenas. And so, I would go to these 100, 200, 300, 400 person events and I would challenge myself to raise my hand and ask the speaker a question.

I could tell you stories where I would just be beet red with embarrassment. My voice would shake. I would get all breathy. I was just so fearful of asking questions. But I was teaching myself on how to ask questions because I was curious and I wanted to learn. I also realized the don't fail belief was one that I was not going to carry with me anymore. And this really created an opening for me to explore another way.

About the same time because I do believe that resources come to you when you need them. I read Carol Dweck's book and basically almost broke down in tears. I was like, "Oh my gosh, this is it. I have been missing this." And also, at the same time I supported a community event called Failure lab. And this was in my community and I think they have actually shared it outside of our community too. But basically, it's an event where people get up on stage and share their failure publicly. Like a TEDx but only for failures.

And there's no point, there's no lessons learned, you just get up in front of hundreds of people and you kind of share your failure. And what the organizers really wanted to do is they wanted to destigmatize failure. There has been studies done about the most successful people in this world and

Ep #14: Learner's Mindset

they have failed multiple, multiple times, sometimes very big. So, I also got coached on my fears and really again, challenged myself to do things differently.

One of the main things I learned by getting coaching and coaching others, and this is actually a really big one and fairly deep. Is that I am 100% whole and worthy as I am. My clients are a 100% whole and worthy as they are/ Neither they nor I, we don't need to do anything more to the worthier. We are humans at the top of the food chain. We have nailed it in evolution. And then everything else is just gravy, just fun.

I want you to think about that, take that in. What if that was true? What if you were a 100% worthy, no matter what has happened in your life? You're a 100% lovable, you're a 100% worthy just as you are, just by being human. And I also realized achieving more isn't going to make me more worthy as a person. If I'm a 100% whole, worthy, lovable, then achieving more isn't going to make me more. I'm already filled up in worthiness, lovability, wholeness.

So, I realize this is pretty deep. But once I really grasped this and really leaned into this belief, everything changed for me. I shed the need for perfection. I started this podcast. I don't think I would have gone however many episodes I've already had, well over a 100 if I was still in the fixed mindset, if I still needed things to be perfect. I shed the need to look the part and play the role and instead I really started exploring who I was authentically.

I probably wouldn't have shared my love for flyfishing in the past, because being out in nature is something that's very important to me I really wanted to share it with you. I also got really curious. I love to learn. I do, I love it, I just get such a high from learning new things. And what I've realized is I love to ask questions. I went from never asking questions because of course I don't want to ask stupid questions, to always asking questions. And being the person that walks a speaker out of the room after presentations, you know the one. That's me.

Ep #14: Learner's Mindset

Now during family game night, I purposely choose to play Pokémon with my seven year old with an inferior deck to better learn the strategy of the game. It's not about winning, it's about learning the strategy. And before you say he's seven, you should play with an inferior deck, you've clearly never played any games with my seven year old. He has been beating us at Pokémon, the card game since he was three or four. He's just – he's figured out his own strategy and he beats both my husband and I on a regular, regular basis. He does not need me to play with an inferior deck.

And flyfishing is the same way. And again, I think I told you, I came into flyfishing a little bit later in life. I was in my late 20s, early 30s, about the same time that I'm sharing this move from a fixed mindset or some awareness around failure and how not failing and not wanting to fail was not working for me any longer. All this kind of happened at the same time.

So, for me flyfishing is about catching fish. It's not about catching the biggest fish. It's about the learning, how to cast my fly to where I want it to go so I don't snag on trees and bushes, other people. So, I could present my fly in a way that the fish is like, "Yes, I'll eat that, thank you. That looks delicious." I now lead my life with curiosity. And I'll talk about that emotion in a second. I lead it with wonder. I lead it with humility and modesty most of the time. I'm not perfect at this.

And I'm also experiencing more calm and groundedness than I've ever in my life. So, I ask questions. I take more risks. I fail and then I actually try to learn from my mistakes. I don't just fail, I actually try to analyze, okay, what worked? What didn't work? What do I want to try differently next time? And when I do fail, when I do lose it has nothing to do with me and my self-worth. It just means that I haven't figured out the strategy yet. I haven't quite figured out how to make it work yet.

So instead of leading it with fear that I messed up and I'm worried about being judged harshly. I now put kind of B, B minus work out into the world. Now, that is really freaky for some of you, I know it. But it's so liberating. I used to spend, honestly, four hours on my blog posts because I wanted all

Ep #14: Learner's Mindset

the grammar to be correct. I wanted everything to be perfect. And ever since I got some major coaching on this and just decided that getting B work out is better than not getting out any work at all and I can just learn from it, it's just been so liberating.

So now it takes me 30 minutes. Sometimes I have to coach myself on the work that I put out there. But that's good because I have the tools to do that. When things don't go as I intended them to then I get curious. As I mentioned at the beginning of this story, so my back went out and I got curious as to why it happened. What was my body trying to tell me? How could I have done things differently? How could I do things differently next time?

And besides when I'm able to get curious it feels to much better than fear, insecurity or anxiety that I might get it wrong, that people might judge me, that I'm going to be found less than. So, curiosity is the main emotion I cultivate when trying to adopt a learner's mindset. And it's also an emotion that I have my clients, Family Business Leader clients also adopt or try to adopt. Because if you can get to curiosity, the anxiety, the overwhelm, the fear kind of drops away.

The frustration, I think I've talked about this before. When somebody comes at you and they're yelling at you for some reason, and hopefully this doesn't happen to you all that often, but sometimes it does. Where you have to have a tough conversation and somebody reacts in a way that is uncomfortable, instead of reacting back or snapping back, or shutting down, I invite you to try to get curious. What are they trying to tell me? What's happening right now? What are they feeling right now? What's going on? Tell me more.

So, when I am successful, the results of adopting the kind of a learner's mindset, that growth mindset that Dweck talks about in her book, is I have a better understanding of concepts and strategies. I actually learn new things. My brain is strengthened. I am strengthening my brain muscle. My

Ep #14: Learner's Mindset

confidence is increased. I become a role model to others, including my son and my husband. And I really do believe the sky's the limit for my growth.

We just had Kim Eddleston talk about entitlement on this podcast. And what I am learning, when I'm in that learner's mindset I'm also earning it. Do you see how that's related? When I'm doing the work, when I'm learning how to do something new, I'm earning the results. They're not just given to me. So, I really believe by adopting this learner's mindset, that your entitlement also goes down. I'm not entitled to those results, I earned those results.

I also rise to the challenge when I set massive goals, you guys, I do, I set massive goals because they're really exciting and I want to challenge myself. And then I have the tools with this learner's mindset to go after those massive goals. And when I do I really feel that I'm fulfilling my potential. And I don't quit. I just keep learning and honestly it feels just way better. I feel more fulfilled. I feel more joyous.

So, here's my call to action. If this podcast is speaking to you, definitely check-up the show notes, there's going to be a link to Carol Dweck's book of course. So, I invite you to pick up her book, take the quiz. I think it's in the first or second chapter. Find out if you're a fixed or growth mindset. And start getting curious everywhere in your life. And also separate your success from who you are as a person. What you achieve and who you are, are two totally different things.

Remember, you are a 100% whole, worthy, lovable and your success is just fun, it's gravy. Anything that you achieve is just because you want to achieve it. It doesn't make you more. And if you do have areas where you think you can be more curious, or there is still some of that fixed mindset, I also invite you to get coaching in these areas. There's some amazing coaches out there that can help you. I can help you, just reach out.

Ep #14: Learner's Mindset

Alright my friend, you are a 100% whole just as you are even if you don't win at monopoly or get all the accolades that you want, you are amazing as the beautiful human that you are. I will talk to you soon. Have a great week.

Well, there you have it. Thank you so much for listening to *The Family Business Leader Podcast*. If you've enjoyed today's episode, be sure to share it with someone who needs it. If you'd like more information about family business leadership development, please visit [successfulgenerations.com](https://www.successfulgenerations.com). I can't wait to connect with you again next week, until then.