

TOUGH

What does it take to succeed in life and business? A new tool for HR professionals sheds light on why people succeed and reveals how to develop the 'eye of the tiger'

Like it or not, tough times usually result in some questioning of one's own worth. The GFC is a case in point. No doubt those who lost their jobs, were forced to work longer hours or were cut back to four-day weeks took a self-reflective look at themselves to understand what they are good at and what they could do better.

rogenSi has taken this concept of self reflection to a new level with a program called Mindset. Central to this program is the belief that people with the mindset of optimism and mental toughness will do better in business and life and that this mindset can be learned.

Registered psychologist Dr Cory Middleton developed the scientifically-based Mindset program after studying world class athletes, business leaders and individuals who had displayed strength of mind and succeeded against the odds.

Mindset involves a tailored survey-based assessment that can be done on individuals, business teams and leaders. From the assessment they develop training programs to help participants reach their highest potential in the workplace.

Human Capital talks to Dr Middleton about the program.

ENOUGH?

Human Capital: What did you learn about mental toughness throughout the GFC?

Dr Cory Middleton:

The GFC presented a challenge for many employers. Businesses had to change their shape, reduce team size, change focus, get back to bare bones and run a fairly lean ship. There was a lot for people to deal with in terms of friends and colleagues leaving the business but also being asked to step it up a notch. There was that duality of coping with the past but also recognising what was needed to move successfully into the future.

We expected people to take a hit in self belief, and we thought confidence would be shot. But what we actually found was it wasn't so much people's confidence that was gone, in fact people still believed in themselves, but it was more their motivation and engagement levels. They lacked belief in their leader's ability to motivate them or create an environment to motivate them.

Organisations are recovering now but just to rebound to what was done before is not necessarily the right thing to do; there's an opportunity to actually do something new – new actions, new thinking, new directions for the business. Leaders are not looking just for people to recover but to actually thrive on the opportunity that's ahead.

HC: Are pessimism and optimism built into a person? Can these mindsets be developed or changed?

CM: We're certainly not born with optimism or pessimism. These are patterns of thinking that are learned over time. Whether you're an optimist is not something that's hardwired and it can be developed. Many people develop it through their parents or their family or

cultural background. As a psychologist myself I've had a lot of experience with individuals who've had those breakthrough moments – it's almost like an enlightened moment for them – when they realise they don't have to be pessimists, that there are different ways of thinking.

HC: How about resilience? Can resilience be developed as a character trait?

CM: We use the terms 'trait' and 'state' a bit differently in psychology. A trait is something that's biologically wired and is a permanent way of being. A state describes the behaviours that we can exhibit from moment to moment. So resilience is not so much a trait, more a state. It's a pattern of thinking that is developed over time, a skill if you like. Once we understand what it looks like, once we understand how to produce it, it's something we all can achieve.

HC: How does rogenSi's Mindset work?

CM: Mindset is a confidential assessment where people can provide accurate indications of what they feel about themselves and their pattern of thinking, so they can understand it and look to strengthen it. It's essentially a training and development tool.

Rather than getting HR people to understand something like resilience and trying to replicate resilience in their business, we actually do it the other way round. We go into the organisation and try to understand what mindset they need to be successful. For example, you might have two companies that have merged together so the mindset that is needed is a one team mentality where everyone is aligned to one brand as opposed to two brands competing with each other. So for that organisation everyone needs their hearts and minds

connected on a one team, one vision, one purpose strategy.

Another organisation may have cut back on team members and have to do more with less, so it could be endurance they're looking for – if they keep going a bit longer they'll see their way out of the challenges they're in.

Once we identify the mindset that's needed to be successful, we benchmark where they currently are. That helps to identify the gaps between where they're at now and where they need to be. Then we'll provide the organisation with the strategies to develop the thinking that will make it successful.



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– Dr Cory Middleton

HC: Is it really a tool for self analysis and assessing where your strengths and weaknesses lie?

CM: Yes it is. It assesses your current pattern of thinking, so you'll get a profile spread over a radial type graph and you can certainly see where your strengths are, and where you generate your strength of mind from, but also the things that impact on you when you feel a little less confident.

HC: What does this self-awareness mean for the individual? Does this tie in with motivation?

CM: The model measures four things. The research identified that there are four core pillars that drive resilience. One is the way people motivate themselves. The

second is the sense of self-belief or confidence, the third is the coping strategies a person has, and the fourth is the control they have over their focus, where they direct their concentration.

When we do programs we typically start in the area of motivation, and when we get the style of motivation right you can go a long way towards setting up your ability to be resilient long term.

You see a greater level of performance achieved long term when people are motivated by what we call mastery. So they take aim at the results but then work back and say, 'what are elements I need to master in order to produce that performance?' So they focus on the building blocks along the way.

HC: Could that be mastering the technical components of your job?

CM: Yes. For example, a sales team may have a particular sales figure to aim for. Rather than pushing towards that, they would break it down to mastering the way they cold call, or the way they talk about the product, or close the deal. If you're focused and motivated to be masterful at every step you will achieve the sales figure without worrying about not hitting it.

HC: What do you do with the results once the assessment is completed?

CM: It goes into formalised training solutions. We can provide specific strategies for individuals, so individuals can pick up certain strategies to develop a stronger pattern of thinking. We can then develop solutions for leaders – building the leadership traits so that they can build an environment that encourages that strong type of thinking. We make sure they deliver their messages and guide their people in synch with the particular mindset that they're

looking for. We can also provide strategies for the team to work on collectively, which is how they interact with each other.

HC: Where did this area of research come from?

CM: My PhD project was completed at the Australian Institute of Sport where I was tasked with finding out what mental toughness is. To do that, I took a bigger approach than just looking at sport because mental toughness is something we as humans have demonstrated time and time again throughout history.

I looked back on research of people going to war – for example, soldiers and support staff like doctors and nurses. It's quite fascinating research about how those people coped with that experience and what the protective factors in each individual were that dictated which way they would go in life. Would they go on and thrive or would they be deeply affected by it?

There is also research around families; these tough kids who grew up in an environment of abuse or neglect. Despite that, there was a protective factor – a pattern of thinking – which drove some of them to be successful. Twin studies are always fascinating. Identical twins living in the same house, subject to the same abuse, and one would go on and do amazing things, and the other was never quite the same. Researchers were able to identify the different pattern of thinking which drove success versus troubled times for the other.

The second body of research involved interviewing over 30 world champions in sport. I spent a lot of time with them on a one-on-one basis to really try to get inside their mind and understand how they think when they're up there doing what they do. We see them on television and they do amazing things and a lot of them make it seem so easy. But behind the scenes, what do they think about when they're out there, what drives that quality of performance, how can they do it under so much pressure?

Based on all that, we developed a model of mental toughness that measures the protective factors in each individual that generates mental toughness. **HC**

