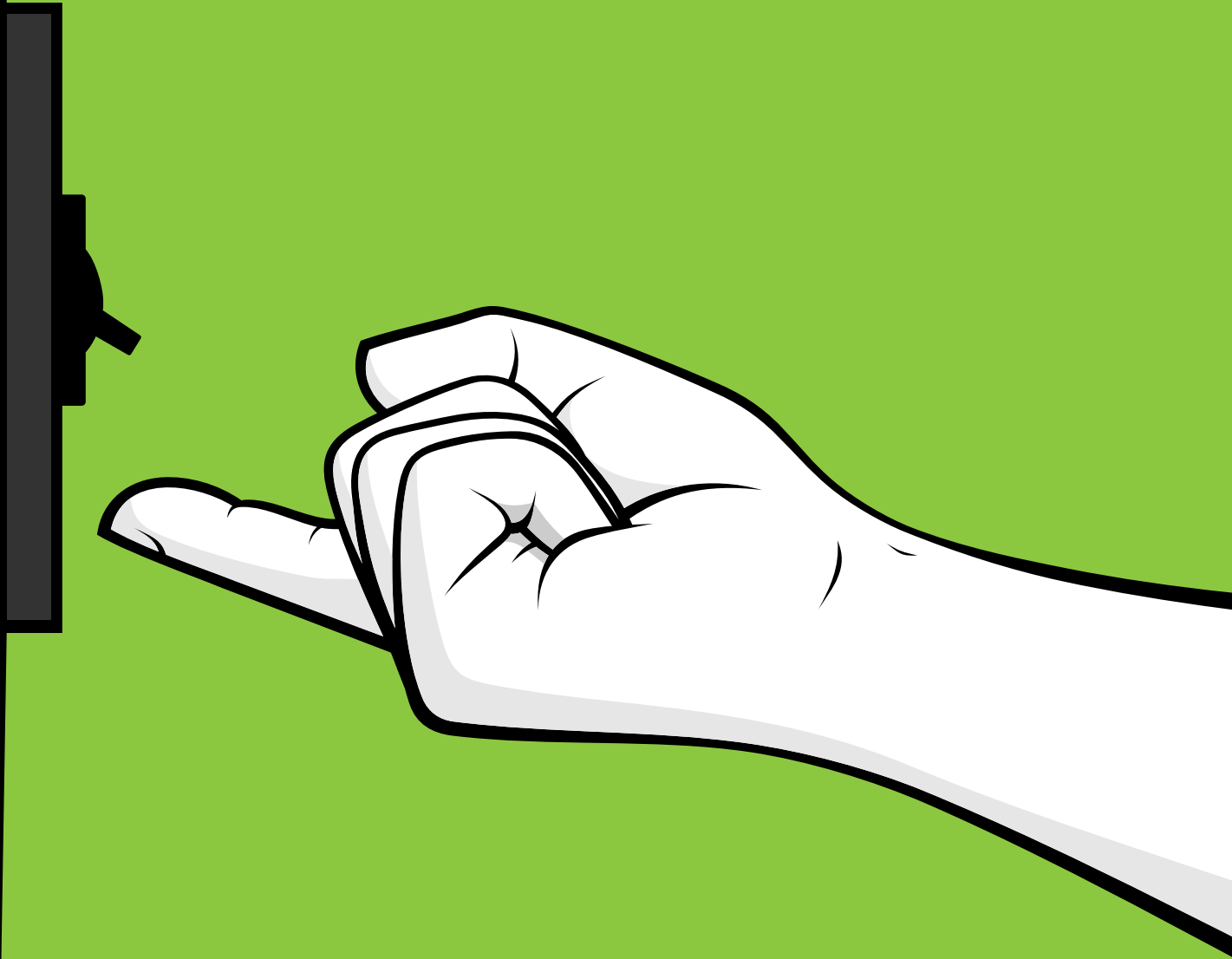


Power Up Learning Outcomes

Switch on a compassion mindset focused on value, capability, and responsibility.

BY NATE REGIER

Although everyone is capable of learning new skills, some people seem to be able to pick them up faster than others. They embrace new learning, take healthy risks, and learn from mistakes. Others hold back, make excuses, worry about doing it perfectly the first time, and prefer to watch instead of trying it themselves. That is particularly salient when learning emotionally charged or high-stakes content such as conflict negotiation or inclusion. Have you observed that pattern in your work as a training facilitator?



At consulting firm Next Element, among the factors we track are the interactions between our trainers and their learners to explore dynamics that may account for variations in outcomes. We've noticed common behaviors among the trainers who consistently obtain the best outcomes from their programs. The differentiator is mindset, which is a set of beliefs and attitudes guiding how a person views themselves and others. It has a powerful impact on behavior.

The mindset concept isn't new. Psychologist Carol Dweck pioneered research on the growth mindset, and the Arbing Institute coined the term *outward mindset*. The right mindset can enhance learning outcomes and behavior change.

So, what mindset do training facilitators need to effectively engage with learners, especially around challenging topics and content? It starts with compassion—but not the traditional version that focuses exclusively on empathy, kindness, caring, and selflessness. Compassion must also include accountability for behavior because people live and work together, and their behaviors affect each other.

People often consider compassion and accountability as opposites, as if they are in friction. That artificial distinction invites individuals to choose one over the other, especially when stakes are high or stress increases. However, doing so creates two problems: Choosing accountability without compassion creates unsafe, toxic cultures that can't keep good talent. But choosing compassion without accountability results in environments of low performance because people avoid conflict.

The solution is Compassionate Accountability—that both-and mindset shift recognizes that compassion and accountability can, and should, work in unison for the best outcomes. Therefore, Compassionate Accountability is the process of building connection while getting results.

Four kinds of struggle

Learning new things and adopting new behaviors is difficult. It's a struggle that can manifest internally or show up in the interactions between a facilitator and a learner. There are four kinds of struggle; three are counterproductive and one is helpful.

Struggling against is adversarial. Every struggle turns into a win-lose scenario. In the learning environment, that may manifest as the facilitator trying to defend an idea or force someone to participate.

Struggling instead of is rescuing. Facilitators, and even other learners, may swoop in with unsolicited advice, which prevents healthy failure, derails discovery, and undermines self-efficacy.

Struggling alone can happen to facilitators or learners. When people don't share how they are doing

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or what's going on inside, it prevents others from being able to help. Vulnerability is key to building connection and getting help. Struggling alone avoids vulnerability.

Struggling with can transform the struggle to create breakthroughs in trust, connections, and growth.

This struggle is the only one that is transformative. The purpose of learning (and life) isn't to get rid of the struggle; it's to find purpose in the struggle. Note that the word *compassion* originates from the Latin root meaning *suffering with*. Facilitators want to feel helpful and be effective. Learners want to feel empowered and know that their perspectives and experiences matter. Struggling with is a co-creative process where both parties share ownership over the learning outcomes and do so in an environment of safety and curiosity.

Can you remember a time when you struggled with someone else toward a shared outcome? The process may have brought you closer together and invited you to stretch your capabilities—together, you may have discovered something new and better. Those results are much more fulfilling than a one-sided process or one that removes all the struggle. Transformation comes from engaging in the struggle together.

In our training programs, facilitators co-create a set of behavior norms to support the best learning environment possible. In each session, the group reviews the norms. For example, one common norm is treating mistakes as learning opportunities and striving to create a safe space to learn from failure. The process increases the frequency with which people ask questions, try new things, and support one another.

Our research and experience shows that when facilitators embrace the concept of struggling with, they can

greatly enhance the potential for learning to occur while minimizing power struggles and subpar outcomes.

The compassion mindset

The compassion mindset is an attitude someone has toward themselves and others that facilitates the process of struggling with each other with Compassionate Accountability.

Next Element's research (see sidebar) has revealed that the compassion mindset involves an individual's three fundamental beliefs about themselves and others:

- **Value.** Because we are valuable, everyone deserves to be heard, affirmed, safe, invited, and included.
- **Capability.** Because we are capable, everyone deserves the invitation to contribute, participate, take ownership, and be part of the solution.
- **Responsibility.** Because we are responsible, everyone is accountable for their feelings, thoughts, and actions.

The figure on page 60 depicts three electrical switches, each representing one of the three components of the compassion mindset. When the switches are on, energy flows in a positive direction, facilitating positive outcomes. Conversely, turning the switches off blocks energy, leading to predictable negative outcomes.

For the past several years, our trainers have been teaching the switches as a precursor module for all our training programs. Simply raising awareness of the three switches and using them as a framework for setting rules of engagement has noticeably improved the trajectory of training programs and the participants' experience.

For example, we have seen changes in individual and team efficacy for a program increase by up to 50 percent compared to the same changes before implementing the module. Because of greater engagement and participation, trainers get through the course material more quickly and with more engagement around the content.

Origination of the Compassion Mindset's Fundamental Elements

Determining that value, capability, and responsibility are the three fundamental components of a compassion mindset was a product of several converging areas of research.

The self-efficacy theory, pioneered by Albert Bandura, shows that a person's beliefs in their own capacity to perform the actions necessary to meet life demands is a strong predictor of behavior. Bandura identified three dimensions of human experience that contribute to self-efficacy: affect, cognition, and behavior.

In 2010, consulting firm Next Element created and validated NEOS, a 12-item, context-sensitive self-efficacy survey for measuring outcomes of the firm's professional development programs. NEOS measures self-efficacy for being open (positive affect toward self and others), resourceful (creative problem solving and resilience), and persistent (perseverance in the face of obstacles). Those constructs measure changes in the three dimensions of self-efficacy. Regardless of the training topic, those three domains are target outcomes in all our programs.

Over the years, as the NEOS data accumulated, we noticed several patterns. First, individuals who had higher self-efficacy at the beginning of the programs were better learners. They mastered the content and adopted new behaviors faster. Second, changes in self-efficacy correlated with program return on investment. The greater the change in self-efficacy, the greater improvements participants reported in teamwork,

interpersonal communication competencies, leadership capabilities, and program satisfaction.

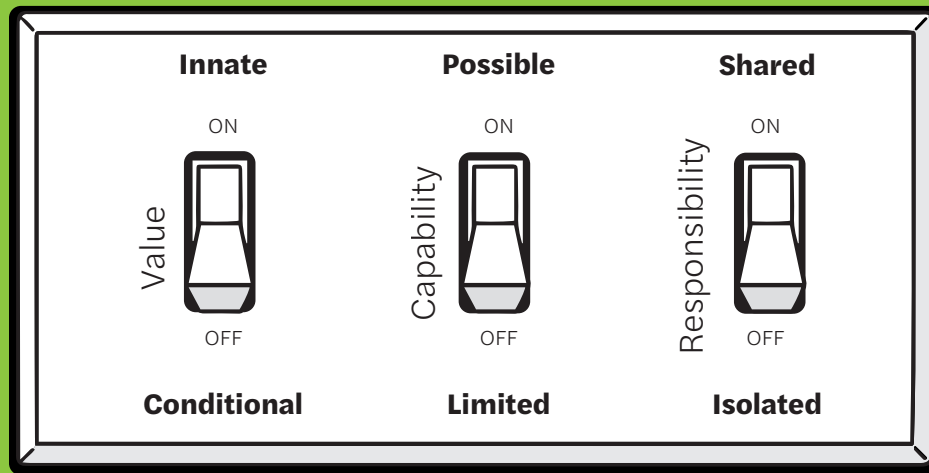
The data shows that a person's view of themselves and others was a strong predictor of learning outcomes, independent of all other individual factors. We hypothesized that if learning providers could intentionally activate and reinforce that mindset from the beginning, they could enhance learning outcomes even more.

We conducted an extensive review of the research on psychological safety, learning theory, mindset, and the neuroscience of behavior change and kept seeing the same three themes: The three conditions supporting optimum performance paralleled the three dimensions we were measuring with NEOS. So, we explored the best construct labels for those themes that would represent the fundamental principle behind each one.

- Value affirms inherent worth and supports an environment of safety.
- Capability empowers people's capacity to create something better and supports an environment of curiosity.
- Responsibility reinforces a person's accountability to others for the impact of their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors and supports an environment of consistency.

Those became the three components of a compassion mindset. From there, we explored how L&D professionals could best activate the compassion mindset in their facilitation, regardless of the content they teach.

The Three Compassion Mindset Switches



When L&D professionals activate their compassion mindset, it guides how they treat themselves and their learners, thereby inviting learners to turn on their switches for better outcomes—regardless of the training event’s subject. That interactive loop permeates every interaction and serves to spread a compassion mindset throughout the learning experience. What follows are tips for how L&D professionals can power up their switches.

Value

When a facilitator’s value switch is on, they view themselves and others as innately valuable because they are human. Everyone deserves to be included as equals on the human playing field. This switch is a fundamental first step, because it assumes that people’s experiences, feelings, and motivations are legitimate and valuable, even if they don’t understand or agree with each other. The facilitator’s goal, then, is not to judge but to be transparent, validate, and empathize.

When the switch is off, facilitators see themselves or others as conditionally valuable. They allow conditions such as past experiences, position, or personality to influence their perception of a person’s value. Further, facilitators can’t separate performance from a person’s value, nor can they have honest conversations about intentions without assuming the worst. Once they decide that someone’s (including their own) value is conditional, facilitators’ primary motivation is to justify that the belief is a true one.

Turn on your value switch with these behaviors:

- Seek first to understand.

- Listen to and validate your own and your learners’ feelings without judgment.
- Assume positive intentions in your learners.
- Affirm learner experiences, even if you can’t relate to them.
- Empathize by finding common emotional ground with learners.
- Be vulnerable by sharing your own feelings, motives, and experiences.
- Realize that valuing a person innately doesn’t necessarily mean you adopt their values or condone their behaviors.

An HR professional for a national call center shared how liberating the value switch has been for her. She is in charge of inclusion initiatives within her department, yet she holds personal beliefs that don’t always align with the values of the people for whom she is advocating. She says that a breakthrough for her was recognizing that she can affirm someone’s value without necessarily adopting their value system.

Such an epiphany is common for people with strong value systems. When their value switch begins to dim, they may judge someone’s worth based on that individual’s alignment with their own beliefs. Keeping the switch on helps people honor their values while encouraging others to do the same.

As another example, a training manager from a global consulting firm made a connection between compassion and psychological safety. They found that compassion, particularly the value switch, supports psychological safety, which enables people to bring their full selves to the learning experience.

Capability

When their capability switch is on, facilitators view their learners as capable of being part of the solution and believe they have the capacity to learn, grow, solve problems, and become more competent over time. As a result, facilitators believe in their learners, invest in them, deploy resources to support them, and look for ways to use their skills and see potential where they may see limitations. Facilitators see failure as an opportunity to learn and grow.

When the switch is off, however, facilitators view capability as limited or stagnant. They see barriers instead of opportunity and adopt unhealthy beliefs such as “You would never understand” or “You don’t have the proper education to grasp this.” Further, before trusting or believing in someone, facilitators expect that person to prove themselves. They also take failure as a sign to change course or give up.

Bobby Herrera is cofounder and CEO of staffing company Populus Group. In his book, *The Gift of Struggle*, Herrera shares this advice regarding capability: “Learn the best way to communicate with every person so you can find ways to stretch their potential without overwhelming them. Challenge people to do more than they believe they are capable of.”

Turn on the capability switch with these behaviors:

- Learn about learners’ experiences, skills, and gifts.
- Encourage learners to share their stories of overcoming obstacles.
- Invite learners to be part of the solution.
- Create an equitable playing field.
- Approach mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow.
- Tell learners you believe in them.
- Ask curious questions and listen openly to the answers.
- Ask learners to stretch themselves and get uncomfortable.
- Explore how you can use differences to the group’s advantage.
- Test your assumptions about learners by disclosing them and asking for feedback.
- Never withhold information that may help a learner become more capable or independent.

Responsibility

When the responsibility switch is on, facilitators accept that regardless of what has happened previously, they are responsible for what happens next—no more, no less. In addition, facilitators take complete personal responsibility for their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors going forward. They focus on how to take

ownership of their part in making things better and allow others to do the same.

When the responsibility switch is off, facilitators attempt to isolate responsibility, either their own or others’; point fingers; look for excuses; and blame. Nothing undermines learning more than playing the blame game.

Turn on your responsibility switch with these behaviors:

- Know your own boundaries and stick to them without apologies or threats.
- Establish behavior norms for the learning experience.
- Ask for and make commitments with learners about behaviors going forward.
- Discern the most critical priorities and use them to guide action.
- Keep the organization’s mission, vision, and values at the center of any learning program.
- Know organizational goals and the mission and connect them to any learning initiative.
- Own up to mistakes, make amends, and adjust behavior.

You can apply the guidance associated with the three switches to help groups develop behavior norms. When a group co-creates its rules of engagement, there is more buy-in, and everyone can contribute to turning on their compassion mindset.

What about other people?

Participants in our programs often ask, “OK, so I have my switches on, but what about others? What if they don’t turn theirs on?”

If your responsibility switch is on, you accept that you have 100 percent responsibility for your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, but you are not responsible for others’. Internalizing that is the first step.

Second, recognize that when you activate your compassion mindset, you immediately change the rules of engagement and how you see things. By doing so, you give others a new and better way to interact with you, one that builds connection while getting results.

The compassion mindset is a fundamental attitude toward people that transforms how L&D professionals approach their work. It creates a learning environment that is safe, curious, and consistent, where people know that they are valuable, capable, and responsible. The results are more engagement, more ownership, and better outcomes.

Nate Regier is CEO and a founding owner of Next Element Consulting. This article is based on concepts from his book, *Compassionate Accountability: How Leaders Build Connection and Get Results*; nate@next-element.com.



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