Researchers uncover a new mindset that predicts success
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To succeed in modern life, people need to accomplish challenging tasks effectively. Many successful entrepreneurs, businesspeople, students, athletes and others tend to be more strategic—and hence, more effective—than others at meeting such challenges. A new study published this week in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences shows that one important psychological factor behind their success may be a "strategic mindset."

This research, led by Assistant Professor Patricia Chen from the Department of Psychology at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, shows that people with a strategic mindset are the ones who, in the face of challenges or setbacks, ask themselves: "How else can I do this? Is there a better way of doing this?" Done in collaboration with Stanford University psychologists, this research shows that as a result, these people tend to apply more effective strategies when working toward their goals in life—including educational, work, health and fitness goals. In turn, they achieve higher school grades, make greater progress toward their professional, health and fitness goals, and even perform a novel challenging task more efficiently.

"These findings are exciting because psychological science has long known that having a wide repertoire of strategies matters. But until now, we hadn't understood why some people use their strategies more than others at the right time. We developed our research on the strategic mindset to explain why this might be," said Asst Prof Chen, lead author of the study.

Asst Prof Chen and her collaborators conducted a series of three studies involving over 860 college students and working adults from the United States. One of their studies on 365 college students found that students' strategic mindset predicted how much they reported using effective learning strategies in their classes. And the more they used these effective strategies, the better they performed in their classes that semester, and also in new, different classes the subsequent semester. A second study produced similar findings. It surveyed 365 adults across the United States about their strategic mindset, and relating their mindset to how effective these adults were at pursuing professional, educational, health and fitness goals of importance to them.

Can people learn a strategic mindset? Yes, the researchers found that a strategic mindset can be taught. In an experiment, they randomly assigned people to learn about a strategic mindset through a brief training session. Later, they gave these people a novel, challenging task to accomplish as quickly as possible. Compared to other people in the study who were not exposed to these strategic mindset ideas, those who had learned about a strategic mindset later applied more effective strategies to accomplish the task. Their strategic behaviors, in turn, translated into faster task performance. Additionally, these people who had learned about a strategic mindset also voluntarily practiced the task more before they had to perform it under time pressure—suggesting that a strategic mindset also
has important implications for practice.

How does the strategic mindset work? Co-author Professor Carol Dweck from the Department of Psychology at Stanford University explained, "There are key points in any challenging pursuit that require people to step back and come up with new strategies. A strategic mindset helps them do just that."

Today, many around the world are facing greater struggles. The good news is, people can immediately apply this insight to their lives. Asst Prof Chen advised, "As you approach whatever challenging goal you are pursuing, you can ask yourself, 'What are things I can do to help myself (and others)? Is there a way to do this even better?' If something you have been working on isn't going so well, can you step back and ask yourself, 'How might I go about this differently? Is there another approach I can try to help this go better?'"

Asst Prof Chen and Prof Dweck have already been working hard on the next steps for this research: to develop and test ways to cultivate a strategic mindset among children and adults at scale.


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