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What Having a “Growth Mindset” Actually Means

by Carol Dweck

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Scholars are deeply gratified when their ideas catch on. And they are even more gratified when their ideas make a difference – improving motivation, innovation, or productivity, for example. But popularity has a price: people sometimes distort ideas, and therefore fail to reap their benefits. This has started to happen with my research on “growth” versus “fixed” mindsets among individuals and within organizations.

To briefly sum up the findings: Individuals who believe their talents can be developed (through hard work, good strategies, and input from others) have a growth mindset. They tend to achieve more than those with a more fixed mindset (those who believe their talents are innate gifts). This

is because they worry less about looking smart and they put more energy into learning. When entire companies embrace a growth mindset, their employees report feeling far more empowered and committed; they also receive far greater organizational support for collaboration and innovation. In contrast, people at primarily fixed-mindset companies report more of only one thing: cheating and deception among employees, presumably to gain an advantage in the talent race.

In the wake of these findings, “growth mindset” has become a buzzword in many major companies, even working its way into their mission statements. But when I probe, I often discover that people’s understanding of the idea is limited. Let’s take a look at three common misconceptions.

- 1. I already have it, and I always have.** People often confuse a growth mindset with being flexible or open-minded or with having a positive outlook – qualities they believe they’ve simply always had. My colleagues and I call this a false growth mindset. Everyone is actually a mixture of fixed and growth mindsets, and that mixture continually evolves with experience. A “pure” growth mindset doesn’t exist, which we have to acknowledge in order to attain the benefits we seek.
- 2. A growth mindset is just about praising and rewarding effort.** This isn’t true for students in schools, and it’s not true for employees in organizations. In both settings, outcomes matter. Unproductive effort is never a good thing. It’s critical to reward not just effort but learning and progress, and to emphasize the processes that yield these things, such as seeking help from others, trying new strategies, and capitalizing on setbacks to move forward effectively. In all of our research, the outcome – the bottom line – follows from deeply engaging in these processes.
- 3. Just espouse a growth mindset, and good things will happen.** Mission statements are wonderful things. You can’t argue with lofty values like growth, empowerment, or innovation. But what do they mean to employees if the company doesn’t implement policies that make them real and attainable? They just amount to lip service. Organizations that embody a growth mindset encourage appropriate risk-taking, knowing that some risks won’t work out. They reward employees for important and useful lessons learned, even if a project does not meet its original goals. They support collaboration across organizational boundaries rather than competition among employees or units. They are committed to the growth of every member, not just in words but in deeds, such as broadly available development and advancement opportunities. And they continually reinforce growth mindset values with concrete policies.

Even if we correct these misconceptions, it's still not easy to attain a growth mindset. One reason why is we all have our own fixed-mindset triggers. When we face challenges, receive criticism, or fare poorly compared with others, we can easily fall into insecurity or defensiveness, a response that inhibits growth. Our work environments, too, can be full of fixed-mindset triggers. A company that plays the talent game makes it harder for people to practice growth-mindset thinking and behavior, such as sharing information, collaborating, innovating, seeking feedback, or admitting errors.

To remain in a growth zone, we must identify and work with these triggers. Many managers and executives have benefited from learning to recognize when their fixed-mindset “persona” shows up and what it says to make them feel threatened or defensive. Most importantly, over time they have learned to talk back to it, persuading it to collaborate with them as they pursue challenging goals.

It's hard work, but individuals and organizations can gain a lot by deepening their understanding of growth-mindset concepts and the processes for putting them into practice. It gives them a richer sense of who they are, what they stand for, and how they want to move forward.

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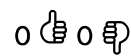
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