Growth Mindset Thinking

Idea In Short

People hold quiet beliefs about their own abilities, and those beliefs steer what they attempt, how they react to setbacks, and whether they ask for help. Carol Dweck's research separates two broad views: that intelligence is a fixed trait, or that it can be developed through effort, strategy, and good teaching. Her team followed hundreds of students through the transition to junior high and found that the second view predicted rising math grades. The idea has since entered classrooms and boardrooms, along with fair criticism of overblown claims. This article explains what the research shows, what it does not, and how leaders can build a culture of learning without empty slogans.

A talented analyst avoids presenting to senior leaders. She believes that people are either natural speakers or they are not, and she has decided which group she belongs to. Her belief does more than describe her. It shapes her choices, because she never practices, never volunteers, and never finds out whether she could improve. This is the territory that Carol Dweck's research on mindsets maps.

Two beliefs about ability

Dweck and her colleagues describe two views. In a fixed mindset, a person believes that intelligence or talent is a set quantity. In a growth mindset, a person believes that abilities can be developed through effort, good strategies, and help from others.

Psychologists use the terms implicit theories, with entity theorists holding the fixed view and incremental theorists holding the growth view. A report from the Association for Psychological Science says that Dweck found students tend to fall into these two camps, and that the beliefs relate to academic motivation and performance.1

The distinction matters because beliefs guide behavior. If ability is fixed, a failure signals a limit and a challenge risks exposure. If ability can grow, a failure signals that a strategy

needs to change, and a challenge offers a chance to learn.

The study behind the idea

The best-known evidence comes from a study by Lisa Blackwell, Kali Trzesniewski, and Dweck, published in Child Development in 2007. A research database summarizes the first part: with 373 seventh graders, the belief that intelligence is malleable predicted an upward trajectory in grades over two years, while the belief that it is fixed predicted a flat trajectory.2

A teaching module that describes the same study shows how the groups diverged. Students with strong fixed mindsets showed a slight decline across both years, while students with strong growth mindsets improved steadily. The module also makes an important point: mindset itself does not cause better or worse performance. It matters because it shapes goals, beliefs about effort, and responses to setbacks, and those behaviors affect results.3

The second part of the study was an intervention. Researchers randomly assigned seventh graders in New York City to a control group, which learned about the brain and study skills, or a growth mindset group, which also learned that working hard can grow the brain and make them smarter. A Stanford summary reports that math grades in the growth group did not drop, and that these students worked harder to meet the challenge of a more difficult workload.4

What the critics say

Mindset research has faced scrutiny, as many psychology findings have. Scientific American reports that questions have arisen about methods, replications, and failed interventions, and that the loudest criticism claims mindset research overpromised and underdelivered. Dweck herself has said that she once thought growth mindset was a simple concept, then realized how many ways it can be misunderstood or implemented poorly.5

Leaders should take both messages seriously. The core finding, that beliefs about ability shape behavior, has support. The claim that a brief lesson or a poster will transform results is much weaker. Effects seem larger when people face real challenges and when the surrounding environment supports learning.

A common misreading is the notion that effort alone is enough. Praising effort when a strategy is failing does not help. Growth mindset means linking effort to better strategies, feedback, and resources, so that people have a path to improve.

Building a growth culture at work

Start with feedback. Describe what a person did and what it produced, such as "the structure of your analysis made the options clear," and suggest what to try next. Avoid labels like "you are a natural" or "you are not a numbers person," which imply fixed traits.

Next, treat mistakes as data. Run reviews that ask what was learned and what will change, and avoid searching for someone to blame. Leaders can model this by sharing their own errors and what they changed in response. People copy what leaders do more than what they say.

Third, design stretch assignments. People grow when they work at the edge of their ability with support. Pair a new task with a mentor, a clear goal, and time to reflect. Fourth, give people ways to improve: training, coaching, practice time, and access to experts. A belief in growth without any route to it breeds cynicism.

Language that supports learning

Words signal beliefs. Phrases such as "not yet," "what could we try," and "what did that attempt teach us" frame difficulty as a stage and not a verdict. Phrases such as "he is just not technical" or "she is a natural" frame ability as fixed. Leaders can audit their own language for a week and note how often each kind appears in reviews, hiring discussions, and casual remarks.

Goals also carry beliefs. A goal framed as proving competence invites people to choose safe tasks and hide errors. A goal framed as building competence invites people to take on harder tasks and ask for help. Write objectives that include a learning component, such as "complete three client presentations and gather feedback after each."

Hiring, promotion, and development

Selection systems reveal what an organization believes. If hiring rewards only current polish

and promotion rewards only past results, people learn to avoid risk. Add questions that explore how candidates learned something hard, how they responded to criticism, and what they changed afterward. These questions surface learning habits that résumés hide.

For development, offer paths that allow people to move across roles, take stretch projects, and return to training later in their careers. Make clear that the organization expects skills to evolve, and that it will help.

Beliefs about teams and others

Mindset applies to how we see colleagues as well. A manager with a fixed view of people tends to sort staff into stars and laggards early, and to stop investing in those labeled as weak. A manager with a growth view looks for what each person could learn, and gives development opportunities more widely.

The same applies to teams. Teams with a fixed view assume that a failing project reveals the true quality of the group. Teams with a growth view ask what they need to learn to do better the next time. The second view tends to produce more experiments and quicker recovery.

A hypothetical example

Consider a hypothetical sales team where leaders rank people by quarterly results and share the ranking weekly. Low performers withdraw, avoid difficult accounts, and stop asking questions. A new director replaces the weekly ranking with shared reviews of calls, in which people discuss what worked and what they would try differently.

She also gives each person one stretch goal per quarter, with a coach. Within six months, discount-driven deals fall and large accounts rise, and people report asking for help more often. The example is invented, yet it shows how changing the feedback system changes the beliefs it communicates.

Cautions

Do not use growth mindset as a way to blame people for structural problems. If a team lacks tools, time, or training, telling members to believe in themselves misses the point. Fix the conditions first.

Avoid false growth mindset, in which people claim the label but act on fixed beliefs. Look at what the organization rewards. If it only celebrates winners, the slogans will not help.

Finally, keep claims modest. The evidence supports the idea that beliefs matter, and it does not promise easy transformation. Measure what happens in your setting, and adjust.

- 1Mind over midterms
- 2Implicit theories of intelligence predict achievement across an adolescent transition
- 3Mindsets: learn it 1, growth mindsets
- 4The right mindset raises grades
- 5Debate arises over teaching growth mindsets to motivate students

Summary

Growth mindset thinking treats ability as something that develops with effort, good strategies, and support. Dweck's longitudinal work showed that students who held this belief improved in math, and her team's intervention helped struggling students work harder. Critics note that results vary and that slogans alone do little, so organizations should change the conditions that make learning safe and productive. Praise the process, reward learning from mistakes, and give people real strategies and resources. Choose one skill you avoid because you feel you are not good at it, plan three small practice sessions this month, and record what you learned from each attempt.