

Developing a Growth Mindset - How individuals and organizations benefit from it

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Does success or failure depend on whether you do or don't happen to have some or other fixed talent? Is it true that you either have talent or you haven't? How are these questions relevant for organizations? This article is about the importance of the growth mindset, the belief in the mutability of human capabilities by effort and experience. A lot of evidence shows that the belief in the changeability of capabilities is an important condition for that change. This belief turns out to be realistic. Anything that people do can be seen as developable skills. What does this insight imply for how we manage and educate people? How can in we, in our organizations, develop a growth mindset culture?

Differences between the fixed mindset and the growth mindset

[Carol Dweck](#), psychologist at University, has been doing research for over several decades into the consequences of what people believe about the mutability of their capabilities ([Dweck, 2006](#)). She distinguishes roughly between two types of beliefs about human capabilities and traits. The first is what she calls a fixed mindset. People with a fixed mindset see their capabilities, for example their intelligence, as unchangeable. They assume that how capable your, for example how intelligent or how musical, is largely determined by a natural talent which cannot or hardly be developed. The second belief is called a growth mindset. People with a growth mindset view their capabilities as a potential which can be developed.

Which belief people have turns out to have important consequences. Research shows that people with a fixed mindset with respect to a certain capability develop a focus on proving that they have this capability rather than on the process of learning. They disregard the process of learning which, of course, impedes their growth and functioning. People with a growth mindset, on the other hand, develop a tendency to put effort into learning and into developing strategies that improve learning and long-term performance. The table below summarizes the main differences between a fixed mindset

and a growth mindset which research has revealed.

	Fixed mindset	Groeimindset
Belief	Capabilities are primarily seen as inborn talents which are hardly changeable	Capabilities are seen as mutable by effort and effective learning strategies
Tendency	To try to appear as capable as much as possible	To try to learn and improve as much as possible
Challenges	Are avoided because, in case of failure, they can give an impression of lack of talent	Are embraced because you can learn from them and they can lead to growth
View on effort	Is seen as an indication of a lack of talent	Is seen as a normal and necessary step to growth
Response to adversity or failure	Is seen as an indication of a lack of talent, often leads to giving up early	Is seen as an indication that more effort and/or better strategies are needed
Response to criticism	Self-defeating defensiveness: own mistakes are not recognized and admitted	Inquisitive and interested, eager to learn and open to feedback and suggestions
View on success of others	Is seen as a threat because these other people might be viewed as more talented	Is seen as inspirational because lessons can be drawn from it for further learning
Impact on own development	Potential is under-utilized which is seen as a confirmation of one's own fixed mindset	Potential is developed which is a confirmation of one's own growth mindset
Effect on other people	Can impede cooperation, feedback, and growth	Can invite cooperation, feedback and tips and stimulate growth

Table 1. Differences between the fixed mindset and the growth mindset

Teaching a growth mindset

That having a growth mindset has important benefits may raise a few questions. Are people with a fixed mindset predisposed to think that way or can a growth mindset be taught? If a growth mindset can indeed be taught, is it hard to do so? How do you do it? Several researchers have developed growth mindset workshops and studied their effects. These studies show that even brief growth mindset workshops establish enduring changes in attendants' mindsets (Aronson, Fried and Good, 2002; Heslin, Wanderwalle and Latham, 2006). These brief mindset workshops may be structured as follows:

1. Information about the growth mindset: by means of presentation, an article, and a video an explanation is given about how people are capable of learning. The video shows how new connections are formed in the brain during learning.
2. Let participants explain the importance: the participants are asked to mention at least 3 reasons why it is important for people to recognize that they can develop their capabilities.
3. Identify and analyze own growth experience: the participants are asked to describe how they have managed to become better in something which they used

to be not so good at.

4. Explain to someone else: the participants are asked to explain to a hypothetical other person how s/he can develop his/her capabilities.
5. Learning from someone else's growth: the participants are asked to think of an example, and to analyze this example, of a situation in which someone else had learned something which they did not think this person would be able to learn.

Aronson et al. (2002) did a workshop with students and noticed how this led to an important change in how these students viewed school. Before the workshop, many students saw school as a place where you, as a student have to perform, and where the teacher judge you. After the workshop they saw school more as a place where you learn, with the help of the teachers, things that make you smarter. Also, they said that, while they were learning, they imagine how new connections in their brain were forming.

Managers with a growth mindset

It goes without saying that these findings on the growth mindset are very important for education. Teaching a growth mindset both to teachers and students can lead to the better utilization of the potential of students. The knowledge on the growth mindset, however, is much broader applicable in all kinds of organizations and contexts. Heslin et al. (2006) trained managers in the growth mindset and found that the trained managers became more effective in their work in several ways. Because the managers started to believe more in the developability of their own capabilities they became more open for feedback and criticism of their employees. Also, they became more effective in solving difficult problems by putting in more effort and by searching for more effective approaches. They also became more effective in coaching and managing their employees. By believing more in the growth potential of their employees they started to pay more attention to their employees' growth and they recognized their growth earlier. This helped them to give them positive feedback which is motivating. Also, they started to see the usefulness of coaching and guiding employees more and they started to pay more attention to and put more time into those activities.

Research shows that the way in which we get feedback influences how we think about the mutability of our capabilities. Feedback often contains hidden messages that can either motivate or demotivate us. Positive feedback is often motivating for people and

negative feedback can threaten people’s sense of competence and the relationship you have with them. **Positive feedback** supports people’s sense of competence and works motivating, and supports relationships and performance.

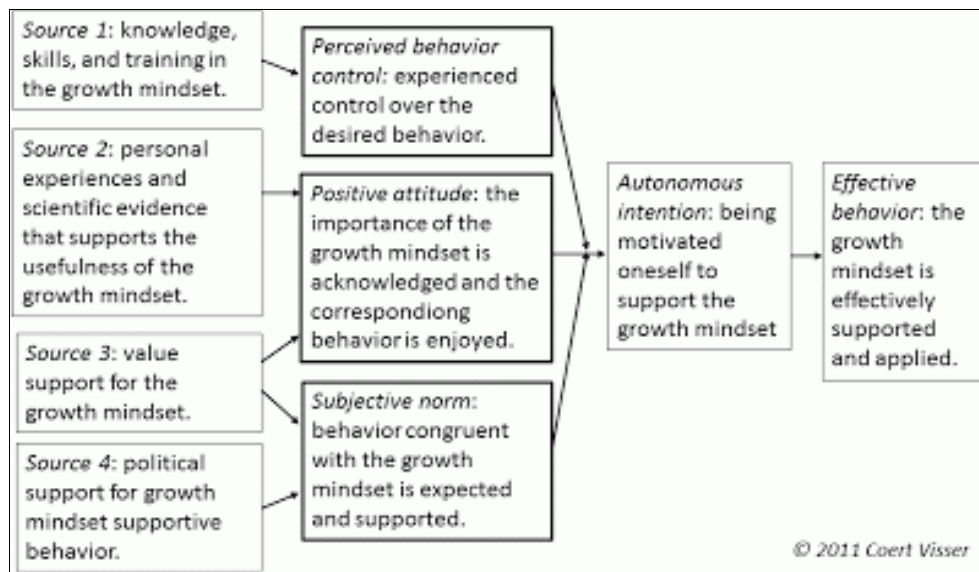
However, research by Dweck (2002) shows that the way in positive feedback is given is also important. She compared two forms of compliments: trait compliments and process compliments. With trait compliments the person is complimented with a trait, an internal, more or less, fixed quality. With process compliments the person is complimented with what he or she has done that worked. The table below shows disadvantages of trait compliments and advantages of process compliments.

	Trait compliments	Process compliments
Example	"You are so smart!"	"You've done that well"
Effect on thinking	Evokes a fixed mindset	Evokes a growth mindset
Effect of feeling	Evokes a sense of pride and satisfaction	Evokes a sense of pride and satisfaction
Effect on behavior	Avoiding challenges Less effort Less endurance Defensive response to failure	Taking challenges More effort More effort Learning from mistakes

Table 2. Differences between trait compliments and process compliments

Building a growth mindset culture

An important question is how we can build a growth mindset culture. Although there is no empirical evidence yet about how this can be done effectively the theoretical framework of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) offers a useful clue (Ajzen, 1991). Reeve and Assor (2011) present an adjusted version of this framework and apply it to establishing an autonomy supportive organization. This adjusted framework can also be used for building a growth mindset culture. Figure 1 shows how this may be done.



The figure shows how the theory of planned behavior assumes that effectively executing certain desired behavior happens when individuals are autonomously motivated for the desired behavior. There are three requirements for this autonomous intention. First, it is required that individuals feel they have influence over the behavior, that they can perform and control the behavior. Second, they need to have a positive attitude with respect to the behavior. Third, it is necessary that the growth mindset is the dominant norm in the organization. The desired behavior needs to be expected and support and, if necessary, enforced.

These three conditions can be achieved by realizing the four sources shown on the left in the figure. The first source is making the required knowledge and skills available. A specific example of how this may be accomplished is to make a growth mindset workshop a standard part of each management training. The second source refers to making scientific evidence and personal experiences available. This may be done by training a few specialists in the organization who can support managers and by sharing knowledge about and experiences with the growth mindset through a newsletter or through an intranet. The third source is to explicitly communicate the importance of the growth mindset throughout the organization by top management and by middle management. In addition to this, several management instruments can be used to support the growth mindset. The fourth source refers to linking consequences to whether or not the growth mindset is implemented for example by promoting managers

who exemplify the growth mindset.

If organizations can build a culture in which the growth mindset represents the normal way of thinking this is likely to have many benefits, both for individuals and for the organization as a whole. A fixed mindset culture encourages internal competition, defensiveness and an emphasis on judging people, whereas a growth mindset culture encourages cooperation, openness and an emphasis on learning. The choice seems easy.

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