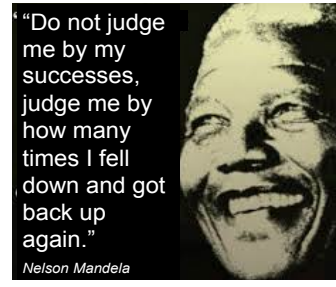
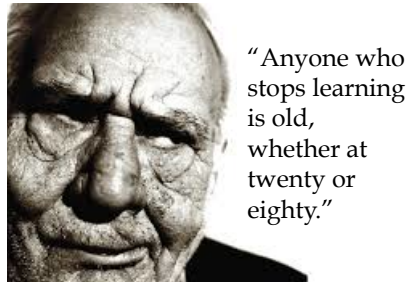


Fixed Mindsets and Growth Mindsets



To what extent does a student’s belief about intelligence affect their learning and aspirations?

In 1978 Carol Dweck took a random sample of 350 students aged between 11 and 12 and gave them a questionnaire to probe their beliefs about talent and in particular, intelligence. She set out to explore the question: “Does a belief in the primacy of talent operate on the edges of our behaviour or does it define the way in which we interpret and respond to challenges? Does it sit in the background, only functioning at an intellectual level, or does it seep into everything we think, feel and do?”

For the purposes of the research, students who held the belief that intelligence is more or less set in genetic stone (subscribing to the ‘talent myth’) were categorised as having a fixed mindset. Those who believed that intelligence can be transformed through effort were labelled as having a growth mind-set. Students were then given a series of problems, the first 8 were pretty easy, the next 4 formidably difficult. As the children toiled, two dramatically different patterns emerged.

Fixed Mindset Group	Growth Mindset Group
<p>As the tasks got more difficult, this group quickly denigrated their abilities and blamed a lack of intelligence for their failures: “I guess I’m not very smart”.</p> <p>They showed a deterioration in the strategies they used.</p>	<p>As the tasks got more difficult, this group grappled with the challenges and didn’t blame anything. 80% of students in the GM Group improved or maintained their strategies during difficult periods. They said things like: “That was tough. How else could I approach this task”.</p>

The differences in performance and attitude were not just dramatic, they were extraordinary. The gaping schism in performance had nothing to do with intelligence or motivation. Indeed Dweck made sure all students were motivated by offering gifts they had personally selected. The gap in performance was opened up by their respective beliefs or mind-sets.

What is meant by a Fixed Mindset (FM)?

Believing that your qualities are carved in stone, creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over. If you only have a certain amount of intelligence, a certain personality and a certain moral character, well you had better prove you have a healthy dose of them.

Dweck declares: “I’ve seen so many people with the one consuming goal of proving themselves – in the classroom, in their careers and in their relationships. Every situation

calls for a confirmation of their intelligence, personality or character.” In the FM, failure is transformed from an action (I failed) to an identity (I am a failure).

Young Adults with FMs

With a FM adolescence and early adulthood is one big test: “Am I clever or thick? Do others like me or loathe me? Am I a winner or a loser?” It’s no wonder that many adolescents mobilise their resources not for learning but to protect their egos, and the main way they do this is by not trying.

This low effort syndrome can be a way to assert their independence from adults and a way to protect themselves. They interpret teachers, parents and other adults as saying: “We will measure you and see what you’ve got”, and answer with “No you won’t”, or something less polite!

No one laughs at how dumb babies are because they can’t talk. They just haven’t learned yet. We marvel at the curiosity and spirit of adventure displayed by many babies and young children, but at some stage and for a multitude of reasons, young people form views about what they can and can’t do and where the limit of their intelligence, potential and aspiration lies. These early views are self-fulfilling and become more embedded with time.

Referring to this idea of a fixed and deterministic view of human potential, Dweck declares: “We must react strongly against this brutal pessimism”.

Leaders with FMs

Some leaders start with the belief that they need to prove and display their superiority. Rather than fostering the development of staff and being inspired by the successes of others, they are likely to feel threatened. Bosses with a FM can become controlling and see ideas and approaches that are different from their own as a threat to their authority.

Instead of learning, growing and moving the company or their department forward, everyone starts worrying about being judged. It starts with the bosses worrying about being judged and ends up being everyone’s fear. It’s hard for courage and innovation to survive in such circumstances.

So how do we interact with FM bosses: do we please them (and risk being labelled a ‘brown nose’), avoid them (and risk being labelled ‘flaky’ or ‘AWOL’); have a ‘frank’ conversation with them (and risk their disapproval, possibly in public) or escape them by getting another job (and risk hearing the same joke about ‘digging a tunnel’).

In the end, many people with a FM understand that their cloak of specialness is really a suite of armour they build to keep safe, strong and worthy. While it may have protected them early in life, later it constricts their growth.

What is meant by a Growth Mindset (GM)?

The growth mindset is based on the belief that a person’s basic qualities can be cultivated through effort, learning and trying new strategies. The GM perspective is that the hand you are dealt is just a starting point. Though people may differ in each and every way, in their initial talents, aptitudes, interests and temperaments, everyone can change and grow through application and experience.

The evidence base over 4 decades and countless studies, by Carol Dweck and other mindset researchers have provided empirical evidence that people with GMs are more:

- open to challenges and constructively critical feedback
- resilient in the face of obstacles and initial failure
- convinced that individual effort makes a difference
- likely to attribute success and failure to their own efforts rather than innate abilities
- able to learn with and from others

For those with a GM, challenges are ideal learning opportunities – a chance to extend their knowledge and skills beyond their current levels.

With a GM, is anyone capable of anything?

Do people with a growth mindset believe that anyone can be anything? That anyone with motivation or education can become Einstein or Beethoven? No, but they believe that a person's true potential is unknown (and unknowable) that it's impossible to see what can be achieved with passion, toil and training.

Summary

In surveys, around 40 to 60% of people have a FM in more situations than they have a GM. The FM isn't a label to condemn, ridicule or reject people and isn't necessarily the deciding factor in whether someone leads a fulfilled and successful life and is a 'good' teacher or a high achieving student. What is indisputable is that our mindset influences our approach to learning and development, to new challenges and to realising our potential.

Billie Jean King, the tennis champion, believes it's all about what you want to say about your life when you look back: "Do you want to say, 'I could have been' as you polish your unused endowments like trophies. Or do you want to look back and say, 'I gave my all for the things I valued'. Think about what you want to look back and say, and then chose your mindset."

For more information

We can all learn how to adopt a GM for ourselves and to support our loved ones and the people we work with. The Primary and Secondary School Sectors are very aware of the powerful influence of mindset and many write their three-year strategic plans with mindset at the heart of everything they do. The most effective coaches and mentors are aware of the enabling or limiting consequences of different mindsets, even if they have not yet studied this area formally. Elite sportsmen and women and effective people in all fields and at all levels know that our beliefs exert a profound impact on our thoughts, emotions and behaviours.

In FE only a handful of colleges are fully aware of the transformational impact growth mindsets can have on the performance of staff and the achievement of students in college and for the rest of their lives. To find out more, contact me at: info@bobcraig.co.uk or bobcraig66@gmail.com

The following texts were helpful in compiling this article:

Dweck, C (2012) 'Mindset: How you can fulfil your potential' London: Constable and Robinson
Hymer, B and Gershon, M (2014) 'Mindset Pocket Book' UK: Teachers Pocketbook series
johntomsett.com (wordpress website/blog by the Head Teacher of Huntingdon School, York)
Syed, M (2011) 'Bounce: The myth of talent and the power of practice' London: Forth Estate