Why are we still talking Fixed vs Growth Mindsets?

By James

August 7, 2017

So much of what you read about Mindsets these days considers that there are only two opposing Mindsets. That is, the Fixed Mindset versus the Growth Mindset.

Looking at Mindsets this way has helped us understand psychologist Carol Dweck’s work. It has also highlighted the importance of developing a Growth Mindset.

However, an over-emphasis on Fixed versus Growth has left us with a combative, disjointed and incomplete understanding of Mindsets. In fact, there are more than two Mindsets. The reality is that there are many Mindsets and our own Mindset lies somewhere along the Mindset Continuum.

The Mindset Continuum recognizes that people can’t be categorized as either Fixed or Growth. In the real world, our Mindset spans a continuum from Low Growth to High Growth. Recognizing this allows us to move to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Mindsets. It opens the door to more practical, powerful ways of nurturing our Mindset to become more Growth oriented.

Here are four reasons why we need to shift the conversation away from Fixed versus Growth to an understanding of the Mindset Continuum:

1. **Fixed vs Growth stigmatises the Fixed Mindset**

   You only need to look at the way social media portrays Mindsets to see how they have become polarised and stigmatised.

   Fixed is RED. Growth is GREEN. Positive images are associated with the Growth Mindset, while negative images are associated with the Fixed Mindset. We are left with a combative way of thinking where Growth Mindsets win and Fixed Mindsets lose.

   The truth is that the Mindset you have is neither good nor bad. It’s not something you chose. It just is. Your Mindset is the sum of all the Mindset messages you’ve received throughout your life. What’s important is that you’re able to recognise your Mindset and work towards making it even more Growth oriented.

   The Mindset Continuum allows you recognise that simply because you don’t have a Growth Mindset, you don’t necessarily have a Fixed Mindset. In fact, everyone has a Growth Mindset. However, some people are more highly Growth oriented than others. Where you find yourself along the Mindset Continuum today is not “wrong” or a deficit – it is the foundation upon which you can build an even stronger Growth-oriented Mindset.

2. **The Mindset Continuum reflects the real world**

   We often overlook the fact that Dweck’s research recognises that people fall along a Mindset Continuum. It’s true that to highlight the importance and impact of Mindsets, she tends to compare the behaviours of people at each end of the continuum: Fixed and Growth. But in her work, there is always the
recognition that many people fall somewhere between, and even those grouped into the Fixed and
Growth ends of the continuum vary in their beliefs.

We often see comparisons made between Fixed and Growth Mindsets. For example, people with a
Growth Mindset understand they can change their most basic characteristics, such as talents, abilities
and intelligence. On the other hand, people with a Fixed Mindset believe they can’t change.

The trouble is, people aren’t like that. People don’t fall into two distinct groups: those who believe they
can change and those who believe they can’t. In reality, some people think they can change a lot,
whereas others see the amount of change they can achieve is limited. Very few people see themselves as
completely unchanging.

Another benefit of the Mindset Continuum is that it shines a light on the middle ground. It reflects the
reality that most people experience being somewhere between the two extremes of Fixed and Growth,
allowing us to more accurately identify what our Mindset is at any given time.

3. The False Mindset
When I’m presented with the false choice of having either a Fixed or Growth Mindset, I face a dilemma.
I know I’m not truly Growth. But I’m not Fixed, either. And because Fixed is stigmatised as a bad thing,
I’m left with one choice: I must have a Growth Mindset!

This is what Dweck and her colleague, Susan Mackie, call the False Mindset. We have a False Mindset
when we declare that we have a Growth Mindset and consider that there’s no more work to be done. But
because we haven’t taken the time to deeply reflect on the reality of our Mindset, our actions may be
more aligned with a Fixed Mindset.

The Mindset Continuum is the perfect tool for combating the False Mindset. Because we aren’t forced to
choose between the two extremes of Fixed and Growth, it allows us to be more accurate and honest
about our Mindset. This, in turn, allows us to be more effective in shifting our Mindset. We know there
is more work to be done.

4. Recognising the Journey
“A Growth Mindset is not a declaration, it’s a journey.” – Carol Dweck

When we see our Mindset as a declaration, we see it as something we can simply adopt. When it’s done,
it’s done. We move on with our shiny new Mindset, giving it little attention.

But life is not like that. Our Mindset is not like a switch we flip between two states. Our Mindset is
something we need to continually nurture and develop. It requires regular attention and constant effort.
Change doesn’t happen overnight. Nurturing and sustaining a Growth Mindset is a lifelong
commitment.

The Mindset Continuum helps us recognise this slow, incremental change. We must constantly work on
our Mindset so we don’t go backwards. This is especially important if we are raising children who we
want to develop more Growth-oriented Mindsets. We can’t expect a single action to have an enormous
effect on their Mindset. Rather, it’s constant action that will make slow, cumulative and effective
change.

The Growth Mindset Continuum opens the door to a deeper understanding of Mindsets. It paves the
way for nurturing more Growth-oriented Mindsets in ourselves and others. It reflects the reality that we
are neither Fixed nor Growth, but that we need to work towards becoming increasingly Growth
oriented.
Going beyond “Fixed V’s Growth”
to a deeper understanding of Mindsets

By James Anderson
Certified Growth Mindset Trainer

Based on the work of Carol Dweck  |  © James Anderson 2017  |  www.jamesanderson.com.au