A tale of two mindsets: How a growth mindset keeps you competitive in a changing workplace

Adaptability has always been a key role in workplace success. But it seems like now more than ever, our careers require us to be constantly evolving. Increased automation, AI, and economic trends have made “punching the clock” for 25+ years a thing of the past.

In fact, according to a new report by workplace consultancy McKinsey, up to 375 million workers worldwide will need to change roles or learn new skills by 2030.

This might seem like a scary thought on the surface. But personal and professional growth has always meant wading into the murky areas and exploring, trying, failing, and learning.

Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck calls this having a “growth” mindset (vs. a “fixed” one). And if you want to change your behaviors, find meaningful work, build better habits, and stay current in the future of work, you need to have one.

What is a growth mindset?

In her book, Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, Dweck describes the simple, yet impactful differences between the two mindsets:

- **Growth Mindset:** People with a growth mindset believe abilities—like talent and intelligence—can be developed through dedication and hard work. They’re more likely to enjoy learning, seek out situations to experiment, and see failure as an opportunity to grow.
- **Fixed Mindset:** Those with a fixed mindset believe the opposite. They feel they “are who they are” and were born with a set level of talent, intelligence, and even interests. Because of this, they’re more likely to seek out opportunities and situations where these views are affirmed (like doing the same job over and over to receive praise) and believe that talent alone—not effort—is the source of success.
The differences might not seem obvious right away, so let’s look at an example.

Let’s say you’re running a small agency with two developers on your team, each with a different mindset.

The fixed mindset developer will be more likely to stick to “business as usual.” They’ll try to use techniques and languages they know have worked in the past. And will be averse to trying new things because they want to rely on their talents alone.

The growth mindset developer, on the other hand, believes the best work comes from trying new solutions. They’ll be more likely to search out opportunities to test new and forward-looking coding languages, without fearing that:

1. They won’t be good at it right away (and it will take work)
2. It might not be the right choice, but they’ll learn from it anyways and become a better coder in the long run

I don’t know about you, but I know who I’d want on my team.

As Dweck writes in her book:
“Why hide deficiencies instead of overcoming them? Why look for friends or partners who will just shore up your self-esteem instead of ones who will also challenge you to grow?

“The passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even (or especially) when it’s not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset. This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives.”

A growth mindset doesn’t just help you thrive in difficult situations. It also gives you the freedom to push the limits of your abilities, find more Flow, and develop your skills.

And if that’s not enough, it can even make you more creative. In her book, Dweck cites a poll of 143 creativity researchers who agreed that the most important trait for creative achievement is the “resilience and fail-forward perseverance attributed to the growth mindset.”

**How to develop a growth mindset at work**

If this all sounds a little high-level, that’s because it is. It’s not easy to think about how you think. And to make matters worse, Dweck is very clear that we all have a mixture of fixed and growth mindsets.

So while awareness is a good first step we also need to be constantly mindful that we’re taking a growth approach to our work.

Here’s how you can do that:

**1. Understand the power of “Not Yet”**

If your job is little more than jumping through hoops, it’s going to be difficult to embrace a growth mindset. Binaries (pass/fail, right/wrong) are a breeding ground for fixed mindsets and should be avoided at all costs.

One way to do this is to embrace the power of “not yet.”

In one example, Dweck explains how when a high school in Chicago replaced a failing grade with “not yet,” they saw a massive improvement from their lowest-performing students. In the context of these two mindsets, a “fail” puts you nowhere, while “not yet” puts you on a trajectory towards success and tells you that you’ve made progress and can continue to grow your abilities.
At work, it’s hard to see failures as anything other than just that. But losing sight of the progress and growth you make every day puts you in “the tyranny of now”—where you feel stuck at your current ability level and shy away from difficulties.

2. Set learning goals vs. performance goals

How you set goals can obviously influence the mindset you bring to work. As Dweck explains, the type of goal you set often reflects on whether you’re seeing the work with a growth or fixed mindset.

Research shows that people with fixed mindsets are more likely to set performance goals (like moving a metric or hitting a KPI) instead of learning goals (like bettering your skills). It might seem like not a big deal, but focusing on performance goals defers to short-term thinking and makes you feel like you either pass or fail. And when you do fail, it can be devastating.

Let’s say you’re a service rep for a company. You can either have a performance goal of 95% customer satisfaction. Or a learning goal aimed at increasing response time and improving your overall communication skills. Hitting that performance goal might be motivating in the short-term, but to advance your career you need to learn to perform better over time.

3. Use deliberate practice (i.e. constantly challenge yourself)

Deliberate practice is a technique where you use a systematic approach to building skills. Rather than just going through the motions, it means going into each session with a specific, challenging goal, getting constant feedback, and adapting and trying new ways to get better.

While a fixed mindset isn’t comfortable being put in a place beyond their comfort zone, a growth mindset revels in it. It promotes challenge and learning over raw talent and has been used by everyone from chess grandmaster Magnus Carlsen to award-winning sushi chef Jiro Ono to become the best at their skills.

4. Ask for improvement feedback (not just praise)

We all love praise. But too much of it can make us fall into a fixed mindset. We fall back on the idea that we’re naturally talented and forget that the best way to get better at new skills is to learn from your mistakes.

When you finish a project, ask for feedback on what you can do to improve. Not just whether the work was good or bad. Dig deep into areas that could’ve been improved or different paths you could’ve taken.

5. Regularly re-visit and re-assess your long-term goals

A growth mindset requires connecting our work to a bigger purpose. And the only way to do this is to be aware of your long-term goals and have a plan in mind. To stay on track, set time aside to go over your goals and make sure they’re aligned with your work.

We all change over time, and adapting is our greatest asset

When a friend of Hunter S. Thompson’s asked him how to live a life with meaning, the eccentric author replied with a lesson on the power of having a growth mindset:
“When you were young, let us say that you wanted to be a fireman. I feel reasonably safe in saying that you no longer want to be a fireman. Why? Because your perspective has changed. It’s not the fireman who has changed, but you…

“So it would seem foolish, would it not, to adjust our lives to the demands of a goal we see from a different angle every day? How could we ever hope to accomplish anything other than galloping neurosis?”

Take a minute to really think about the way you approach your work and your interests. Do you really believe you can grow? Or are you stuck in a fixed mentality?

Our careers, like our lives, are always changing, evolving, and growing. And we need to keep up with them if we don’t want to be left behind.

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