Growth Mindset

The psychologist Carol Dweck of Stanford University studied why some people grow after a setback while others give up. In her book Mindset, published in 2006, she described two ways of thinking about our own abilities. With a fixed mindset, we believe that talent and intelligence are set and cannot change much. With a growth mindset, we believe that abilities can be developed through effort, good strategies and help from others. Most of us have a mix of both, depending on the situation.

1. Embrace Challenges

With a fixed mindset, we avoid challenges, because a failure might show that we are not good enough. With a growth mindset, a challenge is a chance to learn something new. The main concern changes from how we will look to what we will learn. This does not mean taking on everything at once; it means choosing tasks that stretch us a little.

Example: A man who has never cooked avoids the kitchen because he fears a bad meal. He decides to embrace the challenge and tries one simple recipe each week. After two months, he can cook five dishes.

At work: Mai, a sales coordinator, is asked to present the monthly results to the managers for the first time. She embraces the challenge and asks a colleague to help her practise. The presentation is not perfect, but she learns more in one week than in a year of saying no.

2. Persist Through Setbacks

With a fixed mindset, a setback feels like proof that we lack ability, so we give up early. With a growth mindset, a setback is information that shows us what to try next. One useful habit is to add the small word yet: we are not good at this yet. Persisting does not mean repeating the same thing; it means trying again in a better way.

Example: A young woman fails her driving test. She persists through the setback: she asks the examiner what went wrong and practises parking. She passes on her second attempt.

At work: The managers find Mai's first presentation hard to follow. She persists through the setback and tells herself that she cannot explain the data clearly yet. She tries one simple chart, and the next month the managers ask good questions.

3. Value Effort and Strategy

With a fixed mindset, needing effort feels like a sign of weakness. With a growth mindset, effort is the path to mastery. But Dweck warns that effort alone is not enough: when something does not work, we also need new strategies and help from others. So we value the process, not only the talent or the final result.

Example: A father stops telling his son that he is a natural at maths. Instead, he values effort and strategy and praises the way the boy checked each step. The boy becomes more willing to try hard problems.

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At work: Mai works long evenings on a report but makes little progress. Valuing effort and strategy, she changes her method and uses a template from the finance team. The report now takes half the time.

4. Learn from Feedback

With a fixed mindset, criticism feels like an attack on who we are, so we defend ourselves or ignore it. With a growth mindset, feedback is useful information about what we do, not a judgement on who we are. We listen, ask for examples, and choose one point to improve. Not every comment is correct, but most comments contain something useful.

Example: A home baker hears that her cake is too dry. She learns from the feedback and bakes the next cake for five minutes less. The customer orders again.

At work: Mai's manager says that her emails to clients are too long. She feels hurt at first, but she learns from the feedback and asks for an example of a good email. Her shorter emails now get faster replies.

5. Find Lessons in Others' Success

With a fixed mindset, the success of others feels like a threat. With a growth mindset, other people's success is a source of lessons and inspiration. We ask what they did and what we can learn from it. This turns envy into a plan, and it makes teams stronger.

Example: A runner sees a friend finish a race much faster than him. He finds a lesson in his friend's success and copies one part of her training plan. His own time improves.

At work: A colleague of Mai wins the sales award of the year. Instead of feeling jealous, Mai finds a lesson in her colleague's success and asks how she prepares for client calls. Mai adopts the same short checklist, and her calls become more focused.

Conclusion

In summary, a growth mindset means believing that abilities can grow, and acting on that belief. It shows in five moves: embrace challenges, persist through setbacks, value effort and strategy, learn from feedback, and find lessons in others' success. It is not a magic switch, and research suggests that its effects are often modest and depend on the situation. Everyone has fixed mindset moments; the aim is to notice them and choose a growth response.

Sources

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