

Growth Mindset for a More Peaceful, Empathetic World

By Eduardo Briceño

*In this article, **Eduardo Briceño** explains the effects of mindsets about abilities, and describes newer research about how a growth mindset regarding other personal qualities can lead to greater empathy, relatedness and collaboration.*

To what extent are human characteristics such as being kind, joyful, smart, courageous or cooperative fixed or changeable? Can such qualities be developed or are they simply innate? Our answer to that question deeply affects how we behave, perform and interact with others.

First described by Stanford professor Carol Dweck, a growth mindset is the belief that personal qualities can change. It is distinguished from a fixed mindset, which is the belief that human attributes are fixed. Dr. Dweck and other researchers have shown that our mindsets influence our goals, perceptions, explanations and behaviors. These in turn impact the extent to which we improve, foster positive relationships and accomplish our goals.

Mindsets about Abilities

Research has shown that when people understand that they can develop their abilities, it leads them to behave in learning-oriented ways, resulting in greater improvement and performance.

People who see their abilities as fixed tend to be most interested in portraying themselves as being smart and talented. They do so by engaging in activities that they already know how to do well, such as, in the case of someone learning to play a musical instrument, always playing the piece that they can perform easily and without mistakes. When they struggle with something hard, encounter setbacks or make mistakes, individuals in a fixed mindset interpret this as evidence that they do not possess the ability. Consequently, they tend to feel helpless and give up or tell themselves they are no longer interested in the pursuit.

People in a growth mindset—those who understand that they can grow their abilities—tend to want to continue to develop. They challenge themselves to learn skills they have not mastered yet, knowing that they will make mistakes and learn from them. They also recognize setbacks and failure as a part of the learning process, and hence, they respond in more resilient ways by reflecting on what they can learn, trying different strategies and seeking out resources and help. As a result, they improve at a faster rate and achieve greater competence and performance.

Whether in management, leadership, problem-solving, math or teaching, it has been shown that people who believe that their abilities can be developed perform better.

Going Beyond Praise

Many of us unintentionally foster fixed mindsets in ourselves and in others, which hinders growth and achievement. An example is when we praise children or others for being smart or talented after they accomplish a task quickly and perfectly. In doing so, we send the message that success is driven by being smart or talented rather than by developing our abilities through effective effort. Such praise may lead some to feel smart and talented in the short term, but when they later encounter a setback, they tend to conclude that they must not be as smart or talented after

all. They then tend to lose interest in the activity for fear of failure or being perceived as having low abilities. To foster growth mindsets, we can instead discuss with others their behaviors and choices, their strategies, their mistakes and their opportunities to learn. We can value challenge-seeking. We can prompt reflection on the approaches to learning and what is being learned. Most important, we can model being learners ourselves.

Schools can help children develop a growth mindset by encouraging them to examine what they do not know rather than on simply demonstrating what they do know

Praising children or others for being smart or talented is not the only way we inadvertently foster fixed mindsets. In school, when we evaluate all student work with a number or a letter grade instead of giving substantive feedback from which students can learn, we send the message that school is a place to show what we know rather than work on what we do not know. Similarly, teachers and parents are frequently eager to only hear correct answers as opposed to expecting children and adults to spend time challenging themselves and examining mistakes in order to learn from them. Moreover, adults often model being knowers rather than learners, which children and other adults then emulate.

In the workplace, we may label people as “smart” or “A players” or “B players” in fixed ways, which puts us and others in a fixed mindset. We often seek constant, flawless performance rather than discuss what we want to improve and how we will go about doing so, acknowledging that improvement-seeking necessitates experimentation and failed attempts.

A growth mindset can be developed in a number of ways, including: (1) learning about why a growth mindset is important and reflecting on our fixed mindsets; (2) studying the way the brain works, its malleability and how we can better manage and strengthen it; (3) studying the science of how expertise is developed and the biographies of people who became very skillful and capable; (4) surrounding ourselves with learners who challenge themselves and are interested in giving and receiving feedback; and (5) discussing with the people around us what we want to improve and how. Developing a growth mindset involves both internal mental work to learn how to improve as well as external molding of our social environments to support collective learning.

Mindsets about Personal Qualities

Researchers have also studied the effect of growth and fixed mindsets about personal qualities other than abilities, finding that such mindsets influence our perceptions of and interactions with others. Research shows that viewing personal attributes as changeable leads people to make less rigid social judgments and behave in more amicable and collaborative ways.

In the 1990s, Cynthia A. Erdley and Carol Dweck found that when children observe other children, those who believe that personality is fixed make more rigid, generalized and long-term social judgments than those who believe that personality can change. Children in fixed mindsets get strong first impressions that are resistant to change, even upon encountering contradictory evidence. These children also show less empathy and recommend harsher punishments for their peers.

David Yeager and colleagues discovered that when high school students experience wrongdoing, such as when they are excluded in a social situation, they react in more prosocial ways if they have previously learned that personal qualities can change. They feel less shame and hatred

and engage less in revenge. They feel more agency. They are more likely to work to change the situation by sharing their experiences and views and by asking questions to engage in dialogue and negotiation.

Karina Schumann, Jamil Zaki and Carol Dweck showed that when people view empathy as a quality that can be developed rather than as something some people have and others do not, they tend to behave more empathetically when empathy is challenging. In other words, our view of the malleability of empathy does not appear to make much of a difference when empathy is easy, such as when we observe people who look like us and hold similar views to ours. But when others look, think or behave differently than we do, a belief that empathy can be developed leads us to behave more empathetically. In a world with significant polarization, conflict and warfare, this research suggests that we need not only more empathy but also the view that a person’s ability to empathize can grow.

Halperin, Goldenberg and colleagues found that exposing Israelis and Palestinians to the idea that groups can change, without mentioning any specific group, leads them to adopt more positive attitudes toward one another, to become more willing to compromise in the interest of peace and to collaborate more effectively. They come to see others’ views and behaviors more as a product of their experiences, situations and motivations, all of which can change, rather than as something fixed. They become more open to considering where others are coming from, and with a greater understanding they can more effectively negotiate, influence and collaborate on problem-solving tasks.



Source: Mindset Works

Developing Growth Mindsets

Much of the polarization in today’s world may be rooted in fixed mindsets. When people believe in fixed traits, they look to assign traits to other people rather than consider the psychology behind others’ behaviors. Once they assign a trait or quality to someone, they hold onto it. This can happen to people of any religion and across the political spectrum. When it happens to us, we

tend to make blanket judgments and use negative labels to describe others rather than ask questions to try to better understand what has led others to their current beliefs. We make assumptions, distance ourselves and then interpret the ambiguous images we see from a distance as confirmation of our preconceived notions.

In today's world, we not only need more empathy, kindness, collaboration and other positive qualities but also the view that those qualities can be developed within each person. Yet, if we examine our behaviors, we can notice that we often act in ways that foster fixed mindsets.

How often do we strive for flawless performance, hiding our mistakes and deficiencies, instead of taking on challenges that would stretch our abilities, acknowledging our opportunities to improve? The implicit message to ourselves and to others is that we most value *being* capable and knowing rather than *becoming* more capable and continuing to develop ourselves.

When others are feeling down or make a mistake, how often do we try to bring them back up by reassuring them of how smart, talented or special they are rather than focusing on what we can all do to learn, change and improve?

How often do we think and talk about people in another political party as evil, stupid or hypocritical? Our tendency to make blanket judgments and use negative labels prompts us and others to believe there is nothing we can learn from their perspectives and that there is no point in engaging in dialogue toward mutual influence.

We can begin our growth mindset journey by reflecting on when we're in a fixed mindset and what effect it has on us. Such reflection increases our understanding of mindsets as well as our self-awareness, which empowers us to later influence our own beliefs and those of others. Through working on our own transformation, we realize that people can change. We develop a growth mindset, and in the process, we become more capable of helping others do the same.

Improving the world requires all of us to strengthen our understanding that all people and groups can change and to continuously take action to effect such change. We must shift from thinking that the world needs more kind people and fewer unkind people to thinking that we must help all people cultivate more kindness, empathy, curiosity, competence and any other quality that will contribute to greater understanding, collaboration and positive relationships.

Eduardo Briceño cofounded [Mindset Works](#) with Carol Dweck, Lisa Blackwell and others to help people and organizations develop learning-oriented cultures and systems. As CEO of Mindset Works, Eduardo has spoken on the growth mindset at numerous conferences worldwide, including a [TED talk](#). Follow Eduardo on Twitter at [@ebriceno8](#).

<http://commonthreads.sgi.org/post/158049809353/growth-mindset-for-a-more-peaceful-empathetic>