Supervisors, Mind Your Mindsets

Jeff Strietzel, M.A.

Baylor University

TACUSPA - Thomas Moorman Fellow

Abstract

This paper discusses Dweck’s (2006) concepts of growth mindset and fixed mindset as they relate to supervision. Following a brief anecdote, Dweck’s model is described, then readers are encouraged to legitimize the mindsets, become attune to them, and adopt a growth mindset. Supervisors are offered suggestions for practice: praise the process, reward risk-taking, support slip-ups, and let feedback flow. It is argued that a growth mindset leads to gains in supervisors’ and subordinates’ development.
Supervisors, Mind Your Mindsets

A few years ago, I considered asking one of my resident assistants (RA) to step down from her student leadership role. She had made several poor, unprofessional choices. “This RA doesn’t ‘get it,’” I thought. “She doesn’t have the “smarts” for the job. She’s a bad RA.” However, after some reflection, I realized this RA’s poor performance was partially my fault. I had not provided her sufficient training and support. Worse, I had fallen prey to a common tendency: viewing my subordinate’s abilities with a fixed mindset.

The Problem

People with a fixed mindset believe that basic human abilities or intelligence are static traits (Dweck, 2006); talent is considered endowed, not developed. As supervisors, this haves-and-have-nots belief system can have detrimental effects on our professional performance (Dweck & Elliot, 1983)—and those we supervise.

In her book on mindset, Carol Dweck (2006) synthesized nearly 30 years of research on motivation, personality, and talent development. Initially, Dweck investigated how people responded to setbacks. She found that operating within a fixed mindset often produced negative affect and performance (Dweck, 1975). Other effects of a fixed mindset were misguided motivations and misplaced goals (Grant & Dweck, 2003), diminished risk-taking and an aversion to experimentation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), defensive self-protection, and decreased productivity (Dweck, 2009). Perhaps more harmful, some of Dweck’s participants internalized their setback (e.g. thinking “I am a failure” versus “I failed”), which crippled their confidence and performance. In my earlier example, I had transmuted an RA’s imperfect performance into a label (“bad RA”). My fixed mindset approach not only discouraged my RA, it was antithetical to the educational mission, the student affairs profession, and my responsibilities as her supervisor.
Addressing the Problem

In contrast to a fixed mindset, Dweck found those who cultivated a growth mindset were more resilient, successful, and satisfied—even in the face of adversity and failure (Mangels, Butterfield, Lamb, Good, & Dweck, 2006). A growth mindset is the belief system that one’s qualities and talents can be developed. Said differently, growth mindset assumes a person’s self-perceptions, motivations, and abilities can be improved through purposeful effort (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995).

The stark contrast of fixed versus growth mindset might sound over-simplified as individuals do, of course, differ greatly in their interests, abilities, and temperaments. However, in practice, mindsets powerfully influence our attributions and decisions, manifesting differently in various areas of our lives (Dweck, 2006). For example, I might have a growth mindset regarding program development or RA training but a fixed mindset about learning statistical software or budgeting. Left unchecked, a fixed mindset hinders our own development and the quality of our supervisory skills. Thankfully, like other beliefs, mindsets can change.

Here are three recommendations to help you generally cultivate a growth mindset.

*Look:* Mindsets are beliefs systems and beliefs are not always conscious. Adopt mindset lenses in your everyday life and work (Dweck, 2017). After you do, you will see their ubiquitous influence.

*Listen:* Listen to the voices in your head; your beliefs whisper to you. Doubtful and sardonic, the fixed-mindset voice is defensive and image-centric to a fault. In contrast, the growth mindset is curious and gracious. Once you identify the voices, tune out the fixed mindset voice and turn up the growth mindset voice (Dweck, 2017).
**Learn:** Experience is a great teacher, and the best students are active learners. The growth mindset fosters a love for learning and development. It enables you to esteem all experience—successes and failures—as valuable growth opportunities (Dweck, 2006). Remember, however, that knowing about a growth mindset does not mean you *have* a growth mindset (and “having” a growth mindset is a fixed-mindset myth!). You may be ready to engage, exercise, and embody a growth mindset, but doing so is an ongoing learning process.

**Implications for Practice**

Once you have adopted “lenses” to look for the mindsets, become attune to their voices, and engaged the learning process as a “growth mindsetter,” you can begin to integrate four growth-mindset practices into your supervisory role.

**Praise the Process:** Praising your subordinates’ effort, not their intelligence or “talent,” diminishes the fixed mindset and elevates the importance of your subordinates’ growth and development. That said, effort alone is insufficient (Licht & Dweck, 1984). Any learning also takes strategy, time, and other resources (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). Still, praise effort to reinforce the idea that talent is developed through persistent, hard work.

**Reward Risk-Taking:** Calculated risks are the seeds of innovation and growth (Dweck, 2016). Growth mindsetters “do not avoid ‘failure-producing problems’...because challenges and mistakes are seen as opportunities to learn and grow” (Dweck, 2017, p. 140). Allow subordinates to stretch themselves, seek solutions to challenging problems, and make mistakes. Neither you nor your subordinates know all they can achieve until you let them defy their perceived limits.

**Support Slip-Ups:** A growth-mindset supervisor must match their openness to subordinate’s risk-taking with support. Allowing mistakes should not usurp learning as the goal,
and it is amidst a subordinate’s setback that they will most need you to reframe their setback as a valuable learning opportunity.

*Let Feedback Flow:* Whether through casual conversation, facilitating a 360-degree professional review, or coaching, provide frank feedback to your subordinates—and accept it from them. Bi-directional communication builds vital trust and credibility needed as a supervisor and exemplifies the belief that we are all learners (Dweck, 2006).

**Conclusion**

In sum, supervisors, mind your mindset. Do not replicate the mistake I made with my RA. Look for and listen to a growth mindset. Engage continuous learning. Rather than praising “smarts,” praise the process. Rather than “bad RA,” reward risk-taking and support slip-ups. Rather than, “you don’t ‘get it,” let healthy feedback flow back and forth between you and your subordinates. Cultivating a growth mindset in ourselves and our subordinates is messy, at times, but it is worth the effort. Daily application of growth-mindset habits will enhance us as supervisors and those we supervise.
References


