

Your biggest asset for academic career success? A growth mindset

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Is your latest career success testimony to your no doubt commendable talents? Connecting career achievements to ability seems obvious – and crucial in today’s competitive academic environment.

Yet we would argue that we are often blind to the connections between ourselves and our work, and seriously underestimate the influence that our mindset has over career success and happiness. This can be demonstrated by looking at two psychological approaches: the “fixed” mindset and the “growth” mindset.

The fixed mindset: success based on self

For [Stanford University](#) psychologist Carol Dweck, a “fixed mindset” is evident when a person’s perceived accomplishments are psychologically associated with their abilities and attributes. Ongoing work achievements provide sustaining self-verification and vindication. In other words, success happens because we are smart.

Yet just as success is affirming, setbacks and failure can lead to perilous self-doubt and to worries about appearing competent and respected. Goals involving uncertainty, discomfort or higher risk of failure are, therefore, avoided. Ambition and creativity are reduced.

Experiments show that when children with fixed mindsets fail artificially difficult tests, they buttress their self-esteem by being openly disparaging or looking down on peers. In a similar way, labelling colleagues as “struggling”, or seeing them as inferior, leads to higher stress, “peer victimisation”, aggressive retaliation and underperformance.

As those with fixed mindsets assume that others’ behaviour can’t change, peer conflicts resulting from this perpetuate and escalate rather than resolve.

Does talk in your workplace dwell on people’s smartness and successes? It’s ostensibly positive to celebrate awards, grants and publication achievements in websites, announcements and conversations. But our personal mindsets are also influenced and reinforced by those of our working cultures.

This can lead to workplaces that foster failure-avoidance, lower ambition and even unethical research conduct. Notably, the children who failed the experimental test also exhibited a higher willingness to cheat next time.

With some academics confessing to using questionable research practices to increase the chance of success in their work – such as cutting studies short or withholding negative findings – fixed mindsets have important ethical consequences, too.

The growth mindset: learning always

Conversely, people with “growth mindsets” focus predominantly on bringing their hardest and most astute efforts to their work and, crucially, seek to improve by learning from whatever transpires.

Research links the growth mindset with many benefits, including: greater comfort with taking personal risks and striving for more stretching goals; higher motivation; enhanced brain development across wider ranges of tasks; lower stress, anxiety and depression; better work relationships; and higher performance levels.

These benefits don’t happen because difficult work is avoided – it’s actually more likely to be sought.

However, despite research supporting the growth mindset, its influence in academia remains limited. More critically, the centrality of learning in academic work makes the growth mindset seem self-evident: we spend our careers developing new skills and teaching, so what’s the new or big deal with the growth mindset?

Beset with difficult work, financial constraints, bullying and poor mental health, it’s also tempting for academics to dismiss the mindset as hollow positive thinking or a “magic solution” that will only distract us from the real underlying problems and inequities in academia. Yet we

would argue that academia also primes us for the fixed mindset and an incapacity to change this.

When doing challenging and sometimes uncertain work, it's more pleasant to dwell on successes and more reassuring to attribute achievements to our talents while casting others as less able than ourselves. Departments compound this by reinforcing the importance of staff abilities and past successes over their ongoing learning and effort.

Most importantly, breaking our own fixed mindset spell is extremely difficult because our mindset itself determines our perceptions and unconscious biases.

Strengthening your growth mindset

When our mind, careers and workplaces are built around the fixed mindset, how can we grow our growth mindsets? In our new book, *How to be a Happy Academic*, we make some suggestions.

- Learn more: let go of what you cannot control, and focus your efforts on seeking to learn, improve, persevere and work astutely.
- Forgive yourself: instead of perpetuating your own success story, accept and honour the intentions of your actions even when you fail.
- Catch yourself: next time you feel insecure or judge a colleague harshly, stop and reflect on why. Identify what fears about yourself are expressed in your feelings and how you can think about and treat others better.
- Share more: tell colleagues and students more about your failures. Both these and your accomplishments have a place in your career story.
- Above all, though, remember that you can be a successful academic who remains a colossal work in progress. Success in academic work is not only about your growing résumé, but being a growing person, too.

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