

Cultivating a Growth Mindset for Effective Adaptation in Today's Dynamic Workplace*

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Abstract

Many organizations, especially those in complex, progressive fields, find themselves facing unexpected, ill-defined problems and challenges caused by changes in technology, economic forces, or other factors. Such complicated situations develop not only in the business world – school systems and universities also encounter these novel challenges that some experts are labeling “wicked problems”. How can an organization respond quickly and effectively to conditions that may resemble nothing from its past? How can it maintain a competitive edge? What special skills or insights would be useful? This presentation explores how leaders, managers – all levels of employees – can deal with a shifting landscape by developing “adaptive expertise.” In this session we will examine adaptive expertise in terms of organizational culture and learning, psychological safety, habits of thinking, and the “growth mindset” needed for risk-taking and problem solving in the 21st century workplace. And as educators we will discuss how to integrate principles of the growth mindset and adaptive expertise in our curricula and in our daily interactions with colleagues and students.

1. Introduction

Many organizations, especially those in complex, progressive fields, find themselves facing unexpected, ill-defined problems and challenges caused by changes in technology, economic forces, or other factors. Complicated situations develop not only in the business world; school systems, colleges and universities also face these “novel” challenges that some experts are labeling “wicked problems”.

What must an organization do to respond quickly and effectively to a novel challenge that may resemble nothing in the past? How can it maintain a competitive edge? What special skills or insights would be useful? What is the best way to ensure that all the necessary learning and relationship-building take place within the organization? In this session we will consider how leaders, managers – all levels of employees – can respond to a shifting landscape with careful attention to the human factors.

2. The Changing Nature of Organizations, Work, and Workplace

First, let us examine the changing nature of organizations, the workplace, and work itself. These days, very little remains constant. Many organizations, especially those in complex, progressive fields, find themselves facing unexpected, ill-defined problems and challenges, caused by technology innovations, economic forces, or other factors. Sometimes the new developments are positive, but more often they occur as a threat to the organization's well-being. In response, many organizations have become much more agile in the midst of change and uncertainty, in order to stay ahead of their competitors.

Change is occurring on a large scale, everywhere, continuously. In 2014 the British firm Right Management™ surveyed 250 line managers and 100 human resource decision makers in organizations with more than 500 employees. A full 74% of respondents reported that they had restructured in the past two years. What are the large-scale, “macro” effects of these re-organizations? In recent years, organizations have made dramatic changes to their internal structure, such as:

1. The organization is leaner in general. It is functioning with reduced human and other resources, yet the quality standards are even higher.
2. The hierarchical structure has been trimmed. It now has fewer layers of communication and interaction, due to the need to respond rapidly to change. The current approach calls for organizational groupings with more decentralized decision making.
3. Boundaries are blurring. As organizations take on a more lateral configuration, separate units need to work together more effectively. Boundaries between departments and job categories become looser, creating a greater need to share tasks and knowledge.
4. Teams are tops. In many organizations teams now are the most important “unit of measurement”, as a result of pressures to make rapid decisions and reduce inefficiencies.

5. New management perspectives are being implemented. The emphasis now is on commitment to organizational mission and goals. As employees gain more autonomy in decision making, managers operate more like coaches.

6. Change is constant. Organizations alternate cycles of reflection and re-organization, interrupted by periods of relative stability.

Now let us consider the smaller, human dimension – the “micro” level. What are we seeing here? Perhaps most disturbing is that the percentage of human resource administrators who describe their approach to leadership planning as proactive is only 13%. In other words, a full 87% of these leaders make no attempt to anticipate, prepare for, intervene in, or control the unexpected but inevitable novel occurrence, most of which carry negative connotations!

These changes confronting organizations fall into two separate but overlapping domains which can be labeled cognitive and non-cognitive. What do they mean in terms of their impact on workers and managers?

3.Demands for Cognitive Competencies

We are encountering work of increasing complexity. We need to know more than we did in the past. Many knowledge-based tasks require analysis and judgments for work that is impromptu, unfamiliar, and context-based, with few rules or guidelines. More independent decision making by those on the front line is expected.

Continuous competency development is required. In addition to keeping our technology skills current – no small task for many of us – we must continue to expand our job knowledge. With so many teams now comprised of employees with diverse expertise, everyone must make a commitment to learning.

Another concern is that the information overload is oppressive. We all have vast amounts of new information to work with, and greatly enhanced access to it, but this has made our work both easier and more difficult.

Psychologists have identified a new clinical condition - cognitive overload syndrome (COS). Workers with COS exhibit stress, inability to concentrate, the perceived need for multitasking, and a tendency to focus on what is easy to do quickly instead of what is important. Does this sound like anyone you know?

4.Demands for Non-cognitive Competencies

Let us examine some of the non-cognitive demands made on today’s workers. Constant change and uncertainty, and our attempts to respond to them, deplete our energy. While some of us may actually enjoy the stimulation of change, it is taxing with respect to our psychological and physical reactions. Yet we must find ways to cope and remain healthy, and continue to function at a high level.

Social networking will be expected on the job. The extroverts out there may appreciate the constant interaction but their more introverted associates may struggle with what now is called “emotional labor.”

Trust is an issue for many workers in “the new organization.” It does not always come easily, yet a climate of reciprocity and trust can be created by sharing important information, fulfilling promises, and giving and receiving favors (which sometimes can include influencing group decisions). When workers share resources and trust one another, they are more committed to attaining mutual goals, more likely to help one another through difficulties, and more willing to collaborate on new ideas.

Conflict resolution and negotiation are essential to collaborative work. Conflicts often arise over assignments, workloads, goals, recognition – the list is endless. The challenge with conflict resolution and negotiation is to be sure everyone’s ego remains intact and that we do not step all over someone’s feelings on the way to proving our point and making sure that things go “our way.”

5.Use of Teams

To illustrate how these influences “play out” in the workplace, let us look at one of the more common issues affecting organizations today: the increased use of teams. Here is what we are seeing:

1. More space allocated for meetings
2. Smaller individual workspaces
3. A greater number of open individual workspaces, with less privacy
4. Unassigned workspaces – now it’s a matter of “Take any empty seat!”
5. Mobile supports including phones, laptops, PDAs, and wireless
6. Personal video, instant messaging, desktop team software
7. Highly visible displays showing everyone’s progress on a joint project
8. Lockers for personal belongings (because the private offices have been eliminated)

Notice the emphasis on physical space and technology. Now consider the impact of these changes...

1. Increased noise
2. Increased distractions and interruptions
3. Potential for "over-communicating"
4. Cultural differences due to the mingling of diverse groups
5. Individuals working longer hours to compensate for lack of time to complete the individual tasks that remain part of their job
6. Expectations that workers are always available.

Although many aspects of an organization change due to external forces, there is one important dimension that probably will not change, at least not totally. It is what we call organizational culture.

6. Organizational Culture

Every organization has a unique culture, with deeply embedded assumptions, core values, beliefs, and protocols, especially in the areas of communication and relationships. This culture is assumed to such a degree that we do not ever confront it, or debate it, and as a result it is extremely difficult to change.

Workplace culture exerts a strong influence on us – in how to deal with one another, how to behave, how to use our time and perform our jobs. We even know how we are expected to dress and what behavior is acceptable and what is not. Senior leadership creates the conditions necessary to support the culture; managers reinforce and monitor it; and “the rest of us” enact it on a daily, moment-to-moment basis.

7.A Learning Culture

An organizational culture that supports learning will, to a great extent, predict the capability of that organization to adapt to its environment. In today’s Knowledge Economy, those organizations that act swiftly and appropriately in response to sudden, sometimes puzzling, conditions are the ones destined for success. Today’s “tool kit” requires intellectual skills such as:

- Problem identification
- Analysis
- Transfer
- Synthesis

... along with practical skills such as:

- Team work
- Priority setting
- Time management
- Flexibility, and
- The ability to adapt to change.

The most valuable employees will be those of us who take responsibility for our own learning, who initiate action to develop ourselves, who are “pro-active” in seeking learning opportunities – beyond what appears on our job description or contract.

Informal learning activities far outnumber formal learning events at the workplace. The most prevalent informal pathways include mentoring, coaching, team meetings, and, interestingly, those casual chance encounters in the hall or at a meal break. These valuable exchanges occur because the participants respect and trust one another.

For optimal learning to occur, we must broaden our networks and exchange ideas with colleagues from other areas of the organization, not just our own department. Research has shown that having a large network of helping relationships contributes to our performance as well as our knowledge.

8. Giving and Receiving Help and Feedback

Consider how we seek help and feedback as an aspect of self-regulated learning and organizational learning. Expert learners actively engage in “metacognition.” That is, they reflect, regulate, monitor, and revise their learning processes as they go along. They actively think about the quality of their thinking, and make changes where necessary. The decision to seek help from a co-worker is a key strategy of self-regulated learning in the workplace. These employees who actively cultivate their learning place a high value on those informal hallway conversations. They network diligently, not because they are outgoing, but strategically, as a supportive step in their continuous professional development. They make a daily practice of asking for information, advice, support, or some kind of assistance. The value of help-seeking behavior is enhanced because of the social factor and the heavy emphasis on group effort and collaboration in today’s workplace. Research published in The Netherlands in 2014 demonstrated that help-seeking behavior not only improves our knowledge and performance, but in some instances also exerts a positive effect on job performance evaluations.

Now let us take a look at feedback. We ask a colleague for feedback in order to increase our skills, knowledge, and capability. We receive concrete suggestions and examples to guide our next steps. Feedback affirms and builds upon our sense of competence; it validates our work. At the same time, it offers a path to further growth and development as we discover where we stand in the scheme of things – where we might have strayed from the path. This is especially the case with group tasks. Feedback invites sharing and reflection. When we receive feedback, most of us then decide to take some action, so the process of feedback informs our decision-making and planning. Here are a few suggestions for responding to a co-worker's request for feedback:

1. Hold your meeting in private. You do not want to be distracted or overheard.
2. Respect the importance of the relationship. Deliver feedback in a way that strengthens it as you provide the information that will contribute to improvement and growth in your colleague.
3. Take a positive tone. Find something positive to offer, and lead with that. Hearing positive feedback stimulates the reward centers in one's brain, leaving the person open to accepting new direction. If you start with a negative statement your colleague may hear nothing more. Keep in mind that negative feedback simply means that an adjustment is needed. Follow your negative observation with a helpful suggestion to reduce defensiveness in your co-worker.
4. Maintain a two-way conversation. Seek your colleague's perspective, and listen with empathy.
5. Avoid making it personal. The feedback you are giving relates to your colleague's actions or behavior, not to him or her as a person. Preserve your colleague's self-esteem.
6. Be specific. All of us generally respond favorably to specific, positive direction. Rather than say, "You need to be more talkative in meetings," which is rather ambiguous, you might offer a specific remark about the task at hand, such as, "You have so much to offer! I'd like to hear at least one opinion from you in every meeting from now on."
7. Make the constructive feedback positive. Emphasize your confidence in their ability to improve - and pledge to help them.

Earlier I mentioned a Dutch study on feedback. Some of its findings are pertinent to this point. Employees who are committed to learning are eager to receive feedback, even when it is negative. In fact we want that negative feedback, especially as our expertise grows and our goals take shape, because we recognize that through seeing our shortcomings, we can change them, and our performance will improve.

Feedback is a highly valuable element in today's dynamic workplace. It clarifies what is expected of us as we struggle to adapt to the tumultuous, shifting sands of organizational life. It motivates and encourages us. Feedback is a form of recognition and appreciation for what we have done, and because of that, our relationships often take on a deeper, richer meaning and importance.

9.Social Networking

Social networking occupies a position of high importance in today's workplace. As a communication medium, networking is a useful learning tool, enabling each of us to do more to sustain our organization during times of uncertainty. As an integral dimension of organizational learning it is based on the following five factors that affect our desire and our degree of comfort in approaching a co-worker for assistance or feedback on our work:

1. How familiar are we with the other person?
2. What do we know of this colleague's expertise?
3. How available to us is this person?
4. The person's position on the hierarchy relative to our own position
5. Do we trust this colleague to know of our shortcomings and failures?

10.Leader Behavior

Ideally, just as we develop helping relationships with our co-workers, we will develop them with our supervisor also. But this is not as easy as it sounds, is it? Few of us are comfortable letting our supervisor know we are not sure how to proceed with a task. We do not feel safe revealing our uncertainty, especially during a period of organizational change and uncertainty.

Here is one strategy you might use. A safe way to begin is to gain your supervisor's attention and ask if this would be a convenient time for a short conversation. If yes, then you can briefly state your case and ask an open-ended question about one part of it. For example, let us say you are assigned a task and you are unclear on some part of it. Your "help-seeking behavior" is to ask your supervisor to comment on the broader trend that relates to the task now on your desk. Your supervisor's response can give you clues to your next step with the task. The best part is that you can make sure that what you deliver aligns with your supervisor's thinking.

But let us say this scenario goes a different way, and your supervisor replies that he cannot take time for you now. Try to arrange a time to meet soon, and name the purpose of the meeting so your supervisor can prepare. At your meeting, state your open-ended questions as described above. In this way you avoid having to say you are unsure how to proceed with your assigned task, but you explore your supervisor's perspective on it, which should be instructive, and which most likely your supervisor will perceive as a compliment and an acknowledgement of his expertise.

In this way it is possible to cultivate a helping relationship with your supervisor, perhaps to the extent that one day he will reciprocate and seek your views.

Workplace learning is strongly mediated by the behavior of leaders, because when leaders routinely take the time to question and listen to employees—and engage in dialogue and debate — their subordinates feel encouraged to learn. When leaders convey the importance of focusing on problem identification, knowledge transfer, and reflection, these activities will prevail within the organization.

Similarly, when those who hold the formal power are willing to explore alternative points of view, employees feel safe – to work cooperatively, to innovate and create, and to propose new ideas. Leaders who want to expand their pool of fresh ideas – as well as invigorate and motivate – can create opportunities for employees to mingle informally on a regular basis, especially across role functions, divisions, or disciplines. The degree to which management succeeds at creating the conditions for learning to occur is related to how well an organization succeeds at adapting to its environment.

11. Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is a term that describes our perceptions of the consequences of taking a risk. For example, are we willing to “put ourselves on the line” by asking a question, raising an objection, or offering a different alternative? If we ask for help or admit a mistake, will we be embarrassed, criticized, or penalized in some way?

Psychological safety is essential, especially in organizations where knowledge constantly changes, rules sometimes change, collaboration is expected, and wise decisions must be made promptly and without managerial input. Psychological safety is based on the understanding that no one can perform perfectly in every situation when knowledge and “best practice” resemble shifting sand. When employees feel safe, they can focus on the unique and diverse contributions of each person. The result? A stronger performance and better decisions.

Let us consider some research reported last year by Google™ – the search engine company. For more than two years Google conducted interviews with some 200 employees to learn how they defined the perfect team. The company discovered that it is not a matter of who serves on a team, but rather, how the team members act with one another – how they organize their work and perceive their contributions to the group. The following five elements characterize successful teams at Google:

1. Psychological safety: Members know they can take risks without feeling insecure or embarrassed.
2. Dependability: They can count on each other to do high quality work according to schedule.
3. Role structure & clarity: The team structure, goals, and action plans are perfectly clear.
4. Meaning of work: The work they are doing is important and of personal value to each member.
5. Impact of work: They honestly believe that the work they are doing makes a difference.

We also know from research that when psychological safety is absent from the workplace, a team loses the benefit of the expertise of each member, and begins to experience what is known as the Common Knowledge Effect. When this happens, teams tend to focus on all their shared information. They have difficulty taking advantage of their diversity and expertise – the very knowledge and expertise for which they were hired. The consequences of this Common Knowledge Effect include poor performance, poor decision-making and missed opportunities for innovation.

12. Leader Behavior

As a leader, what can you do to promote a culture of psychological safety? First, you can establish processes for...

1. Generating, collecting, interpreting, and disseminating information;
2. Experimenting with new possibilities;
3. Gathering intelligence on competitors, customers, and technological trends;
4. Identifying and solving problems; and
5. Developing employees' skills.

Also, in meetings you can...

1. Demonstrate your willingness to study alternative viewpoints;

2. Signal the importance of spending time on problem identification, knowledge transfer, and reflection;
3. Engage in active questioning and listening; and
4. Include time for group reflection, and encourage everyone to reflect between meetings.

In sum, an effective learning environment exists when everyone (a) feels safe when disagreeing with others, asking naive questions, acknowledging mistakes, and presenting minority viewpoints; (b) recognizes the value of opposing ideas – because the dialogue which develops increases energy and motivation, sparks fresh thinking, and prevents lethargy and drifting from topic; and (c) takes risks and explores the unknown.

13. Employees' Role in Promoting Psychological Safety

Employees share the responsibility for maintaining a climate of safety. For example, when a co-worker stops by your office to visit, rise and welcome him. If possible, eliminate any physical barrier between you, such as your desk, and sit together in similar chairs in an “equal” way. Avoid leaning back in your chair with your arms clasped behind your head. You may think you are setting a relaxed tone with this posture, but in fact you are displaying dominance, as animals do – and it will be perceived as such by your colleague. Despite your good intentions when you say, “Come on in!” you are unintentionally warning your colleague to mind his step around you. Take care with the messages your gestures and posture transmit.

You can look for opportunities to commend a co-worker for an especially creative idea or proposal. Or you can confide to a colleague that you shared the concern that they so bravely voiced in yesterday's meeting. Your sincere and thoughtful praise and recognition are more important than you realize, and might be exactly the “lift” your colleague needed at that moment. In return, the next time you are praised, especially in the presence of others, tell the person how much you appreciate it, and notice how it creates a feeling of good will and cooperation.

Today's foremost challenge for employers is to inspire and enable knowledge workers to focus on solving problems that cannot be anticipated. This must take place on a continuous basis. With frequent changes in technology, diversity and society, organizations need employees who can (a) cope when events do not occur as planned, (b) embrace new ideas, and (c) adapt to challenges. Such flexibility is a critical quality that organizations need.

14. Adaptive Expertise

We do not receive training in adaptability, yet it is a vital quality in today's workplace. It is hard enough to solve problems when we have all the pieces in front of us. Jobs today and tomorrow will call for people who possess skill sets that ignore boundaries, the emotional capacity to deal with uncertainty, and the talent to cope with change.

It is no longer enough to be an expert in only one domain. We must be willing to be a beginner once again, when new developments come knocking at the door. We must look for ways to transfer our existing knowledge to new situations. We must consider all the angles, and then acknowledge but deliberately reject routine approaches and solutions. This is the 21st century reality, with the need for a new “tool kit”, new habits of mind, and adaptive expertise.

Right now you may be asking, what does “adaptive expertise” look like? What exactly is required of me? Here it is! The adaptive worker:

1. Plans ahead, but has options ready in case things go wrong;
2. Anticipates and responds positively to changing environments;
3. Accepts new challenges and revises plans on short notice;
4. Thinks quickly in response to sudden changes in circumstances; and
5. Persists and remains calm in the face of difficulties.

If you choose, you can develop these adaptive skills, starting with just a few new habits of thought. To demonstrate an “adaptability mindset” on the job, start here:

1. Relax your grip on the rule book. Is it your habit to refer to the standard operating procedure on everything? When is the last time your process changed? Do something differently once in a while.
2. Be more open-minded. When you find yourself rejecting a new idea or feeling pessimistic about an initiative, stop yourself. Ask questions instead of expressing disagreement or negativity. When you have a moment to reflect, think about your immediate reaction, and challenge yourself to see something positive in the situation.
3. Start your day differently. Make a little change in your routine – eat something different for breakfast, perhaps. Probably you follow a lot of routines at work too. Form a new habit. You

may discover that starting your day differently can trigger openness to doing things differently for the rest of the day.

4. Decide to become an early adopter of something. Be the first one in your work group to embrace a new change. Find a helpful new app for your mobile device or a new process for your organization. Learn it thoroughly – and then introduce it to your colleagues.

5. Be gracious in hearing alternative solutions. Be willing to bend when your suggestion is met with doubt. Show acceptance of the alternatives proposed by others. Be a team player.

6. Accept surprises. When your schedule has to change because something “comes up”, be gracious. Volunteer for the extra tasks when it is important to the organization. The next time you need some help, you will be more likely to receive it if you are known for helping your colleagues when needed.

7. Accept new roles. Show a commitment to your organization by being cooperative when shifting into a new role. This is one of the hardest things to do because of the stress – but you will win big points by showing your loyalty and flexibility. And keep in mind you will be developing new skills, which can boost your career.

8. Be calm and confident. Your initial reaction to a dilemma or a sudden troubling event says a lot about you. Can you be adaptable? If you occupy a leadership position these “new ways of thinking” will be especially important for you.

15. Leader behavior

I suggest that those of you in leadership positions explore the following dimensions of leader qualities as compiled by a group at Harvard University.

First, consider your ability to anticipate. If you can detect ambiguous threats – and opportunities – on the periphery of your organization, you may be able to avert being taken completely off guard when a novel situation arises, with significant implications for the organization. Ask yourself:

- Do I have the right networks in place to help me see opportunities before competitors do?
- Am I comfortable challenging my own and others’ assumptions?
- Can I persuade a diverse group to buy in to a common vision?
- Do I learn from mistakes?

To strengthen your ability to anticipate, the Harvard group proposes the use of scenario planning in which you imagine various futures and prepare for the unexpected.

How comfortable are you with challenge? Leaders with adaptive expertise question the status quo. Only after careful reflection and examination of a problem – through many lenses – do they take decisive action. This deliberation requires patience, courage, and an open mind. To strengthen your ability to challenge, solicit input from people not directly affected by a decision, who may have a different perspective on the repercussions.

Focus on your ability to interpret. Try to recognize patterns, remove ambiguity, and find new insights. To improve your ability to interpret:

- Actively look for missing information and evidence that refutes your hypothesis.
- Supplement observation decision-making with quantitative analysis.

Build your decision-making skills. Sometimes you have to make difficult choices quickly, and with incomplete information. Now, as a strategy, insist upon multiple options and do not get pulled into yes/no choices. Use a disciplined process that considers both short- and long-term goals. To improve your ability to make decisions, the Harvard group suggests that you divide big decisions into pieces to understand the individual parts.

Develop your ability to align with your colleagues. In other words, become skillful at finding common ground and achieving cooperation with colleagues whose views and agendas differ from your own. Your success depends on timely communication and trust building. To improve your ability to align:

- Communicate early and frequently to combat the two most common complaints in organizations: “No one ever asked me” and “No one ever told me.”
- Identify the key internal and external stakeholders, identifying their position on the issue and noting areas of disagreement. Look for hidden agendas and coalitions.
- Show your appreciation for colleagues who support team alignment.

Above all, make a commitment to learning. As a strategic leader, you are central to learning in your organization. You can make a practice of finding the lessons in both successful and unsuccessful outcomes. To improve your ability to learn:

- Reward employees who try to implement an idea with high potential but which fails in terms of outcomes.

- Identify initiatives that are not producing as expected, and examine the root causes.
- Support a culture in which inquiry is valued and mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities.

16. Teaching for Adaptability

To those of you who teach, how might you modify your curriculum to include helping students to develop adaptive expertise – or “adaptive competency” as some educational researchers present it? With the 21st century workplace changing so rapidly, employers are actively seeking graduates who can adapt to changing circumstances and embrace new ideas. New graduates must be able to prove to an employer that they can perform in these ways:

- Show willingness to learn new things and take on new tasks.
- Demonstrate initiative & self-reliance. Be brave in dealing with disappointments.
- Be creative – find new ways of doing things. Learn to multi-task.
- Draw conclusions from new and changing information.
- Be resourceful with a positive, 'can do' attitude toward change.
- Look for ways to make changes work rather than insisting on why not.
- Adjust methods and shift priorities when necessary.
- Be brave enough to improvise and to move into action without a plan.
- Be tolerant of time pressure and work well under deadlines.
- Keep an open mind. See the bigger picture. Enjoy variety.

17. The Growth Mindset

We have established that learning is critical to the workplace, and that challenges can promote learning. Your success in the workplace stems from the image you hold of yourself. How did your present self-image evolve? For most of us, self-image (and self-esteem) in relation to learning were shaped during our childhood, at school, where some learning tasks are easy, stimulating and rewarding, and others are boring and difficult.

Stanford University psychologist Dr. Carol Dweck has focused her career on researching individual mindset differences and their effects upon students' choice of strategies, effort, persistence, and learning results. What is mindset? The term refers to mental attitude that determines how you will interpret and respond to situations – in this instance, learning. I am including this next section on learning in childhood because it is as relevant to our adult life as it is to early childhood development.

Professor Dweck discovered that the way a child views a learning task affects how much he will persist and how well he will perform over a period of time. A key concept here is that some children tend to think of human ability as fixed and constant. They are sure that no matter how much you learn or how hard you work, your intelligence stays the same and cannot change. Such children think of classroom learning tasks as occasions for performance – moments when they are called upon to show how smart they are. If they perform poorly on a task, they conclude that they lack intelligence – that they “just don't have it.” They do not consider the possibility that they simply have more to learn. They decide that next time they will avoid the challenge and choose an easier task, with the result that a learning opportunity is lost. Professor Dweck originated the term, “fixed mindset” to describe the belief and attitude pattern of these learners.

Students with a fixed mindset avoid effort in general. They believe that when you have ability, everything comes naturally. Consequently, when they are expected to work hard, and encounter difficulty, they feel stupid. They do not handle setbacks well – they get discouraged or defensive when success eludes them. They may blame others, or even cheat.

In contrast, we see other students with a growth mindset. These students view challenging work as an opportunity to learn and grow. They actually enjoy difficult problems that they cannot solve – yet.

What are the behaviors we observe in the learner with the growth mindset? She or he...

1. Focuses on effort; struggles, persists despite setbacks;
2. Chooses difficult tasks and take risks;
3. Focuses on strategies; reflects on different strategies that succeed – and those that fail;
4. Focuses on learning and improving;
5. Seeks challenges; and
6. Works hard all the time.

What is the “self-talk” we hear from the learner with the growth mindset? “I know that putting a lot of effort into learning and working hard are essential. The harder I have to work at something, and the more effort I put into something, the better I'll be at it.” These students understand that success follows effort.

18. Teaching to Build a Growth Mindset

Salman Khan in 2014 noted that “mindsets toward learning could matter more than anything else we teach.” Such a view is critically important in today’s world, where the teaching of mindset must not be left to chance.

Some teachers teach their students about the different mindsets directly. For example, you might illustrate the concept of the growth mindset by having your students write about, and share with one another, something they used to be poor at and are now very good at. This kind of discussion encourages students not to be ashamed to struggle with something before they are good at it.

Academic learning tasks that are meaningful generate interest, effort, appreciation for learning, and success. We can design and provide meaningful learning tasks that teach students to love learning, enjoy challenges, work hard every day, become resilient, and refuse to give up when the challenge increases. We can also teach them about meta-cognition – or “thinking about thinking” – so that they will monitor, regulate, reflect, and revise their learning activities. Put another way, we as educators can present learning tasks in such a way that students develop a growth mindset – one that leads not merely to short-term results but to long-term achievement and success.

The most effective teachers promote the growth mindset in their students in several important ways. They praise students for the learning process they selected, the effort they applied, the strategies they used, the choices they made, the persistence they displayed, and so on. All of these approaches yield more long-term benefits than telling students they are “smart” when they succeed. Here are some strategies that have been found effective:

1. Demonstrate that you believe your students can learn. For example, capture a student giving a correct answer to a question in class, and remind her that last week she did not yet understand that concept. Point out that her effort to learn has brought success.
2. Model enthusiasm and intrinsic motivation. Show your interest in the topic you are introducing, and explain why this new knowledge will benefit them.
3. Create a learning environment that is encouraging and challenging. Pay careful attention to the tone of your voice and your gestures, so that they reinforce and match your words.
4. Acknowledge the difficulty of tasks. Refrain from saying, “This problem is easy.” It is better to acknowledge that specific tasks are difficult and remind your students that they are capable.
5. Connect learning to the world. Teaching methods that promote real-life applications help students better understand the material, process the information in a different way and become more effective learners.
6. Set goals. Setting intermediate goals can be self-motivating because it allows students to experience a sense of competency as they accomplish smaller goals.
7. Involve students in the learning process and allow them some independence, especially with projects.
8. Evaluate the task, not the student.
9. Praise the student’s effort and acknowledge progress.

One of the most exciting ways to support a growth mindset in students is to grade for growth. At one high school in Chicago, when students do not master a particular unit of study, they do not receive a failing grade – instead, they receive a grade of Not Yet. Students are not ashamed of this grade because they know they are expected to master the material, if not the first time, then the next time, or the next. The word “yet” is valuable and deserves a place in every classroom. Whenever students say they cannot perform a task or are “not good” at something, the teacher can add, “yet.”

Meaningful academic work not only promotes learning in the immediate situation, but also promotes a love of learning and resilience in the presence of obstacles. This kind of meaningful work takes place in classrooms where teachers praise the learning process rather than the students’ ability, where they communicate the joy of tackling challenging learning tasks, and where they highlight progress and effort. Students who are nurtured in such classrooms will develop the values and tools that bring lifelong success.

Learners of all ages who develop a growth mindset can use positive “self-talk” to boost effort and persistence. Such an orientation leads to a healthy and confident perspective on risk-taking. We can see that the child who learns that intelligence and ability are not static and that mistakes are to be expected matures into the adult who dares to be innovative and creative in the workplace. The perceptions and beliefs we form about our abilities – and our possibilities – originate with the messages we tell ourselves. It shapes how (and whether) we take risks, create change, move forward, and achieve our full potential in life.

19. The Growth Mindset and You

We have discussed our students and how we can guide them – but what about our own learning in the workplace? How do you respond to the errors you make, when a co-worker identifies them? How do you answer your supervisor when he points out a flaw in your pet project? Do you reveal a fixed mindset or a growth mindset?

Our response to criticism begins with our self-image. Are you a finished product, or are you a work in progress? Is there a subject or a skill that you value, but which you have not mastered – yet? How can you be even more successful by exchanging help and feedback, and by graciously receiving and adapting to suggestions from colleagues?

20. Conclusion

We who have devoted our lives to education understand that it is a serious responsibility to “touch the face of tomorrow” in so many unforgettable ways, whether we work with children or adults. If you are an administrator, a leader, then you are in a position to influence your employees’ success and well-being. You can create an environment that supports and facilitates the development of adaptive expertise, flexibility, creativity, and innovation. You can foster a climate of psychological safety among your employees. If you teach, then you too have opportunities every day – every moment that you stand in the presence of a student – to demonstrate continuous lifelong learning, a “can do” attitude, and innovative, adaptive skills that will contribute to the strength of your own work, your department, and your institution as a whole.

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