

Managers' Implicit Assumptions About Personnel

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ABSTRACT—*Effective managers recognize both positive and negative changes in employee performance and take appropriate remedial action when required. Managers' assumptions about the rigidity or malleability of personal attributes (e.g., ability and personality) affect their performance of these critical personnel management tasks. To the extent that managers assume that personal attributes are fixed traits that are largely stable over time, they tend to inadequately recognize actual changes in employee performance and are disinclined to coach employees regarding how to improve their performance. However, a growth-mindset intervention can lead managers to relinquish their fixed mindset and subsequently provide more accurate performance appraisals and helpful employee coaching. Implications for performance evaluation procedures and avenues for future research are outlined.*

KEYWORDS—*implicit theories; assumptions; mindset; performance appraisal; coaching*

Imagine you have a colleague on your team who used to be a star performer but over the last few years has consistently made mistakes that let down the team and make it almost impossible for you to work effectively. Nonetheless, your boss neglects to notice any decline in this person's performance. How would this situation make you feel?

Organizational effectiveness requires that personnel be managed, developed, and rewarded based on their actual performance, rather than on managers' flawed perceptions of an employee's performance. In reality, however, managers' perceptions and decisions about employees are often systematically biased. Employees tend to receive significantly higher performance appraisals and rewards if they were hired by their current manager, illustrating managers apparently making personnel decisions guided by adherence to their prior positive judg-

ments about an employee's performance capability (Schoorman, 1988).

Following Latham and Heslin's (2003) suggestion for organizational psychologists to draw on well-developed theories from other subdisciplines of psychology, this article outlines how educational and social psychological research on implicit theories (cf. Dweck, 1986, 1999) has paved the way for promising new advances in understanding and addressing personnel management issues such as those we have mentioned.

IMPLICIT THEORIES

Implicit theories are the assumptions that individuals hold about the rigidity or malleability of personal attributes such as abilities, intelligence, and personality (Dweck, 1986). A prototypical *entity implicit theory*—recently also called a *fixed mindset* (Dweck, 2006)—assumes that such personal attributes constitute a largely stable entity that tends to not change much over time. An entity implicit theory is illustrated by the traditional notion that people have a given intelligence quotient (IQ) that cannot really be developed. People who hold predominantly to entity implicit theory, whom Dweck calls “entity theorists,” tend to agree with survey items such as “As much as I hate to admit it, you can't teach an old dog new tricks. People can't change their deepest attributes” (Levy, Stroessner, & Dweck, 1998, p. 1431). In contrast, an *incremental implicit theory* assumes that personal attributes are relatively malleable, leading individuals to express agreement with statements such as “People can change even their most basic qualities” (Levy et al., p. 1431). Prototypical “incremental theorists”—also referred to as those with a *growth mindset* (Dweck, 2006)—thus tend to believe that people can change and develop their behavior over time, particularly when they devote a concerted effort to learn and apply more effective strategies for task performance.

The terms “entity theorist” and “incremental theorist” are widely used in the literature for the sake of conveniently denoting those who subscribe primarily to either an entity or an incremental implicit theory. In reality, people tend to hold

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implicit theories or mindsets that lie somewhere along the continuum between the incremental and entity prototypes.

The research on implicit theories or mindsets being discussed here should not be confused with two very different bodies of research. These are (a) research on “implicit personality theory,” which pertains to people’s implicit assumptions about the types of personality attributes (e.g., conscientiousness and friendliness) that tend to co-occur, and (b) “implicit leadership theories,” which deal with the types of traits and behaviors (e.g., acting charismatically or authoritatively) that different people or cultures assume define “leadership.”

Implicit-theory research should also not be confused with the issue of whether the fixed or growth mindset is more “correct.” While it is well known that there is substantial empirical evidence that supports both fixed (Deary, Whiteman, & Starr, 2004) and growth mindset assumptions (Dweck, 2006) about the stability of psychological attributes, the implicit-theories research we discuss here focuses on a very different issue: specifically, the *implications* of holding either a primarily fixed or growth mindset for how one acts and interacts with other people.

Whether managers hold predominantly fixed- or growth-oriented assumptions about others significantly affects the accuracy of their performance appraisals, as well as their engagement in employee coaching.

PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS

An extensive program of research by Carol Dweck and her colleagues (cf. Dweck, 1999) established that entity theorists’ implicit assumption that personal attributes are largely stable leads them to quickly form strong impressions of others that they resist revising, even in light of contradictory information. Holding an incremental implicit theory, however, makes individuals likely to view others’ behavior as the product of malleable personal characteristics such as their effort and strategies (Heyman & Dweck, 1998). Individuals holding an incremental implicit theory also pay more attention than entity theorists to information that is inconsistent with their expectations (Plaks, Stroessner, Dweck, & Sherman, 2001). A noteworthy characteristic of these studies is that they were conducted with either children or students performing tasks unrelated to their role as students.

To examine whether managers’ implicit theories affect their judgments of employees, we (Heslin, Latham, & VandeWalle, 2005) assessed nuclear power plant managers’ implicit theories before having them observe and evaluate a hypothetical employee’s video-recorded “poor” negotiation performance. The managers then observed and evaluated the same employee exhibiting “good” negotiation performance in similar situations. As predicted, the extent to which the managers held a growth mindset positively predicted their accurate recognition of



Fig. 1. Managers’ performance ratings of poor and then good employee performance as a function of their fixed- or growth-oriented mindset.

improvement in the employee’s performance.¹ In other words, managers with a fixed mindset did not fully acknowledge the extent to which the employee’s performance had improved (see Fig. 1).

This finding established that the results from Dweck and colleagues’ student-based research generalize to managers performing a task relevant to their managerial role. The outcome of this study also raised the fundamental issue of whether the results reflected (a) managers with a growth mindset providing higher subsequent performance evaluations in accordance with their optimism about people’s growth potential, or (b) a fixed mindset leading to evaluations affected by managers’ rigidly held initial impressions.

We (Heslin et al., 2005) explored these competing alternatives with a second study in which a different sample of nuclear power plant managers evaluated first the employee’s good negotiation performance and then his poor negotiation performance. The result—that managers’ degree of growth mindset predicted their recognition of decline in employee performance—established that a growth mindset seems to make managers more data-driven in response to performance change, rather than being either (a) unduly optimistic about an employee’s performance trajectory, or (b) as apparently biased by their initial impressions as the managers with a more fixed mindset. This study, however, raised yet another interesting issue. Specifically, do the results of this second study reflect an *anchoring effect*, whereby a fixed mindset leads managers’ judgments to be anchored by their initial impressions of the employee’s performance, leading them to under-adjust their subsequent evaluations of changed performance? Or alternatively, could the results of this second study reflect a *consistency effect*, whereby managers with a growth mindset exaggerate observed behavioral changes in order to provide ratings

¹As compared to the “true” score rating of good performance ($M = 4.06$), which was determined by Borman’s (1978) protocol of subject matter experts viewing the performance twice, taking notes, and discussing their observations before recording their ratings.

that are consistent with their espoused belief that people can change?

In a third experimental study, we (Heslin et al., 2005) investigated these alternative explanations using a longitudinal design, in order to minimize the possibility that participants would perceive a connection between completing the implicit-theory survey and subsequently evaluating employee performance. Six weeks after we assessed all participants' implicit theories, those participants randomly assigned to the treatment group read negative background information about the employee, while those in the control condition did not receive this information. All participants then observed and evaluated the employee's "good" negotiation performance. Contrary to the potential consistency effect, participants with a growth mindset did not provide higher ratings of good performance if they had previously been given the negative background information about the employee's prior performance. In contrast, those with a fixed mindset provided lower ratings of good performance if they had received the negative background information about the employee's prior performance. This finding supports the anchoring explanation for the role of managers' implicit theories in their recognition of change in employee performance.

Together, these three studies suggest that holding a fixed mindset makes managers disinclined to adequately alter either a positive or a negative initial impression of an employee's performance. The practical significance of this finding is underscored by the fact that employees could become resentful, unmotivated, and inclined to leave an organization in which improvements in their initially subpar performance are not appreciated. Recall the thought exercise that opened this paper, about how you would feel if your boss neglected your colleague's chronic performance deterioration. Perhaps even more importantly, an unnoticed decline in the performance of personnel such as airline pilots, nuclear power plant operators, paramedics, surgeons, or security guards could seriously compromise organizational effectiveness and human safety. Performance declines clearly need to be recognized so that appropriate remedial action (e.g., on-the-job coaching, job redesign, or disciplinary action) can be undertaken. Next, we address how managers' inclination to coach employees also stems from their mindset.

EMPLOYEE COACHING

Dweck, Chiu, and Hong (1995) theorized that adopting the entity assumption that human attributes are unalterable could make individuals disinclined to invest in helping others to develop and improve, relative to those who hold the incremental assumption that people can change. After all, why bother investing in other people's performance improvement if you hold the fixed mindset that substantial behavioral change is unlikely to occur?

Consistent with this reasoning, laboratory studies have revealed that, compared to those with a fixed mindset, people with

a growth mindset are more likely to educate rather than punish a "wrongdoer" (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, & Fu, 1997); provide helpful learning suggestions to a struggling fellow student (Heyman & Dweck, 1998); and express interest in helping other less well-off children by collecting money for a UNICEF event (Karafantis & Levy, 2004). In two longitudinal field studies, using different methodologies, we (Heslin, VandeWalle, & Latham, 2006) explored whether these findings generalize to the workplace. In both studies, managers' incrementalism predicted employee evaluations of the extent to which managers had coached their employees.

The evidence that a fixed mindset impedes managers' acknowledgment of employee behavioral change and their engagement in employee coaching raises a theoretically and practically important question. Specifically, can managers with a fixed mindset be trained to adopt a sustained growth mindset that increases their proclivity to recognize employee performance change and to coach employees when required?

CHANGING IMPLICIT THEORIES

Implicit theories tend to be relatively stable over time (Robins & Pals, 2002), although they can be experimentally manipulated (Dweck, 1999; Wood & Bandura, 1989). However, a fixed mindset is more readily cultivated than a growth mindset (Tabernerero & Wood, 1999). We (Heslin et al., 2005) investigated whether managers with a fixed mindset could be trained to adopt a growth mindset that lasts beyond the duration of an experimental session. To do so, we developed an incremental intervention—based on principles of self-persuasion (Aronson, 1999)—that exposed those with a distinct fixed mindset to the following five components:

- *Scientific testimony* regarding the validity of incremental assumptions, using both a customized "scientific" report and an incremental-mindset induction video that illustrated how the brain is capable of "growing like a muscle" throughout life.
- *Counter-attitudinal idea generation*, which involved having participants generate responses to the question, "As a manager, what are at least three reasons why it is important to realize that people can develop their abilities? Include implications for both yourself and for the employees you manage."
- *Counter-attitudinal reflection*, in which participants answered three 2-part reflection questions about when and how they, and people they know, have changed and developed their abilities and personality over time.
- *Counter-attitudinal advocacy*, in which participants wrote an e-mail of advice to their hypothetical protégé, "Pat," outlining evidence that abilities can be developed, together with anecdotes about how they have personally overcome professional development challenges.

- *Cognitive dissonance*, induced by asking participants to identify (a) three instances when they had observed somebody learn to do something they thought this person could never do, (b) why they think this occurred, and (c) what could have been the implications of their doubt about this person's potential; to reinforce the incremental message, participants then read aloud and discussed their advocacy "e-mails" and responses to the cognitive dissonance questions in groups of three.

Six weeks later, the fixed-mindset managers who received the intervention exhibited a relatively enduring increase in their incrementalism; they also (a) provided the employee with a higher quantity and quality of suggestions for improving his performance (Heslin et al., 2006) and (b) exhibited greater acknowledgment of improvement in the employee's performance than fixed-mindset managers in the placebo condition (Heslin et al., 2005). Indeed, 6 weeks after receiving the incremental intervention, managers who had held a fixed mindset provided appraisal ratings and coaching suggestions that were similar to those of managers with a chronic growth mindset.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS

To enhance workforce productivity, cues for managers to adopt a growth mindset could be built into performance evaluation systems. These cues might include written, verbal, and video-based reminders to managers who conduct performance appraisals that all employee skills tend to be developed over time with practice and helpful feedback. Managers could also be held accountable for employee coaching and for their responsiveness to actual employee performance change.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Many interesting questions regarding how managers' assumptions affect their personnel management remain to be answered. Can the results of the growth-mindset intervention just described be replicated within an organizational setting, when employee perceptions of managers' coaching and appraisal fairness are assessed as a function of the induced incrementalism of managers who held a fixed mindset? What elements of organizational leadership and climate affect how long induced incrementalism endures? Are managers with a growth mindset perceived as more procedurally just, by virtue of providing more accurate appraisals and employee coaching? How do such potential employee perceptions affect their subsequent attitudes and behaviors, such as organizational commitment and citizenship behaviors—that is, willingness to "go the extra mile," beyond their formal job requirements, to help achieve organizational objectives?

Students' fixed mindsets predict their formation of and adherence to stereotypes about other people (Levy et al., 1998).

Research is needed on whether this finding generalizes to the workplace, thereby affecting organizational processes such as the development of effective working relationships within heterogeneous teams and first-impression biases within selection interviews. Empirical support for these speculations would suggest additional ways that growth-mindset training could facilitate effective personnel management. Finally, research could usefully explore potential downsides of an extreme growth mindset, such as continued fervent investment by managers in developing poor-performing employees who show virtually no discernible performance improvement over time.

Recommended Reading

- Dweck, C.S. (1999). (See References). Provides a comprehensive summary of research regarding the role of implicit theories in self-regulation (e.g., goal setting and reactions to setbacks), as well as how implicit theories affect interpersonal judgments and interactions with other people, as addressed in the present article.
- Dweck, C.S. (2006). (See References). Offers highly accessible ideas for understanding and applying insights about the mindsets to life domains including sports, business, intimate relationships, and parenting, as well as additional methods for cultivating a growth mindset.
- Heslin, P.A., Latham, G.P., & VandeWalle, D. (2005). (See References). Offers further details about the nature and rationale for the five-component incremental/growth mindset intervention described in this article.
- Heslin, P.A., VandeWalle, D., & Latham, G.P. (2006). (See References). Outlines the rationale and results of three studies that provide evidence that managers' incrementalism positively predicts the quantity and quality of their employee coaching.
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