

**Mindsets and Employee Engagement: Theoretical Linkages and  
Intervention Opportunities**

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Engaged employees work with dedication, vigor, and absorption (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). They exhibit persistent motivation, emotional connections to their work and other people, as well as the vigilance associated with flow (Kahn, 1990). Various factors are known to cultivate employee engagement. These include fair and trustworthy leaders who show employees how their work makes a positive difference (Avolio et al., 2004), jobs designed to provide optimal levels of autonomy, challenge, and feedback (Saks, 2006), restorative non-work recovery (Sonnentag, 2003), freedom from sexual harassment (Cogin & Fish, 2009), and a work environment in which employees are consulted, appreciated, and have a best friend (Harter, 2008). Regardless of the work context, why are some employees still inclined to be more engaged than others?

We propose that employees' engagement also depends upon their mindset about the extent to which their abilities are malleable<sup>1</sup> (Dweck, 2006). We begin by outlining the nature of mindset. Next we discuss how employees' mindsets affect whether they approach their work with energy, enthusiasm, and immersion (i.e., engagement), or with the ambivalence, anxiety, and risk avoidance that are hallmarks of disengagement (Kahn, 1990). Then we review how mindset can influence managerial behaviors. We conclude by discussing how organizations, managers, and employees can foster the mindsets likely to either facilitate or to undermine employee engagement.

## **Mindsets**

Mindsets embody the assumptions people hold about the plasticity of their abilities. A *fixed mindset* reflects the implicit belief that human attributes are essentially stable entities, as revealed by agreement with statements such as “You have a certain amount of ability and really

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to Dweck (2006), the mindset concept was known as implicit theories of ability (*cf.* Dweck, 1999).

can't do much to change it.” A *growth mindset* reflects the alternate assumption that abilities are pliable and thus amenable to being cultivated, as signified by agreement with statements including “You can always greatly develop your abilities”<sup>2</sup>. A fixed mindset is embodied in the popular view of IQ as largely constant across a person’s life, while a growth mindset inclines people to focus more on how IQ can be developed through targeted developmental efforts (Dweck, 1999, 2006).

Some noteworthy characteristics of mindsets are as follows: First, although mindset is a continuum, most individuals tend to gravitate towards holding either a fixed or a growth mindset. Second, each mindset occurs with roughly equal frequency within most populations. Third, neither mindset is predicted by a person’s ability level, personality, education, or cognitive complexity. Fourth, people can simultaneously hold differing mindsets, such as a growth mindset about their computing ability and a fixed mindset about their public speaking ability (Dweck, 1999, 2006). Finally, Dweck et al. (1995, p.279) conceptualized mindsets as “relatively stable but malleable personal qualities, rather than as fixed dispositions.” Although chronic mindsets are fairly stable over at least three years (Robins & Pals, 2002), research (e.g., Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Heslin, Latham & VandeWalle, 2005) has supported Dweck’s (1999) notion that mindsets can be cultivated by compelling or continuing messages. This potential of mindsets to be changed by an intervention parallels the well-established ontology of other moderately stable though potentially malleable individual differences including need for achievement (McClelland & Winter, 1969), hope (Snyder, Rand, & Ritschel, 2006), and optimism (Seligman, 1998). We now consider how mindsets cue the types of thoughts, feelings, and motivation associated with engagement.

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<sup>2</sup> For full mindset measurement scales and information about their reliability and construct validity, see Dweck, Chiu, and Hong, (1995), Levy, Stroessner, and Dweck, (1998), as well as the appendix of Dweck (1999).

## **Employees' Mindset and Engagement**

Mindset can influence employees' engagement in several ways; specifically, via their zeal for development, view of effort, psychological presence, and interpretation of setbacks.

### *Zeal for development*

When people have a growth mindset, they construe their abilities as able to be cultivated through targeted practice and other developmental initiatives (e.g., coaching, reading, or taking a class). A fixed mindset leads to perceiving novel or challenging tasks as a test of inherent abilities. The risk that such "tests" might diagnose unalterable ability deficiencies can cause those with a fixed mindset to disengage and avoid challenges from which they may learn.

Based on English proficiency scores, Hong et al. (1999) identified students entering the University of Hong Kong (where English proficiency is a necessity) who could benefit from remedial English classes. After the students' mindsets were assessed, they were asked about their willingness to undertake a remedial English class. Among the students with low English proficiency, those with a growth mindset were much more interested in taking such a course than were the students with a fixed mindset. Rather than reveal a deficiency and remedy it, the students with a fixed mindset preferred to put their academic careers at risk. This illustrates that a fixed mindset can lead people to avoid rather than engage in useful developmental opportunities.

### *View of effort*

Is sweat and toil an indispensable ingredient for effective learning and performance, or an indicator of lacking talent? How people respond to this question depends upon their mindset.

Those with a fixed mindset believe that having ability is a largely sufficient condition for learning – that if you have ability, you should not need to expend considerable effort. A related idea is that having to work hard indicates that you are obviously not gifted in a particular area. It

is thus not surprising that students with a fixed mindset report that one of their main goals in school is to exert as little effort as possible (Blackwell, et al., 2007).

People who hold a growth mindset generally view high effort as essential to developing virtually any ability. They attribute their disappointing performances to inadequate *effort* and/or *strategies*, followed by intensified effort and striving hard to discover ways to perform more effectively. A fixed mindset is associated with attributing disappointing performance to low *ability*, exerting *less* effort going forward, trying to avoid the area in which they performed poorly, and even considering deception (e.g., cheating) as a means to inflate future performance ratings (Blackwell, et al., 2007). Such cynicism about the utility of effort could clearly undermine the whole-hearted investment of oneself that characterizes engagement.

#### *Psychological presence*

Another hallmark of engagement is psychological presence (Kahn, 1990). Attentiveness, a key facet of psychological presence, can facilitate interpersonal relationships, as well as learning and performance on dynamic tasks. Inadequate vigilance can jeopardize safety and potentially lead to deadly accidents (Saks, 2008). Mindset plays an important role in receptiveness to evolving realities, as shown by data collected at the behavioral (Heslin et al., 2005), attentional (Plaks, Dweck, Stroessner, & Sherman, 2001) and neurological levels (Mangels et al., 2006).

Mangels et al. (2006) tracked college students' event-related brain potentials as they worked on a difficult general knowledge task. Shortly after participants had typed each answer, they were given ability-related feedback about whether their answer had been right or wrong, followed soon afterwards by learning-relevant feedback about the correct answer. The waveforms associated with error detection and correction revealed that participants with a fixed

mindset had significantly less neural activity in the region of the brain associated with processing the corrective feedback, compared to those with a growth mindset. A fixed mindset also undermined learning from the corrective feedback, as revealed by inferior subsequent retest performance relative to that exhibited by those with a growth mindset. These results reveal how a growth mindset facilitates the alertness to new information that helps people to flourish.

### *Interpretation of setbacks*

Feedback indicating that one's performance has fallen short of expectations is to be expected in modern workplaces. The meaning ascribed to failures and setbacks, such as whether they are seen as threatening cherished abilities and identities, determines how well people recover, learn and persist. People with a growth mindset tend to view setbacks as an inevitable part of the learning process and thus a useful indicator of which strategies work and which do not. A growth mindset stimulates the self-improvement focus of studying the strategies of better performers and choosing challenging tasks on which learning (and also risking failure) is more likely (Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008). People with a growth mindset thus respond to setbacks by staying engaged via continued task focus, vigorous effort, and systematic strategy development (Blackwell, et al., 2007; Taberner & Wood, 1999).

From the perspective of a fixed mindset, failure provides people with diagnostic information about how little ability they possess – and will likely ever possess – often leading to self-defeating cognitions, affect, and behaviors. These include wanting to study what worse performers did and opting to do unchallenging, uninformative tasks in order to make themselves feel better (Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008). Other dysfunctional manifestations of a fixed mindset are withdrawal of effort, willingness to lie about a poor score, worrying, and not seeking feedback (Heslin & VandeWalle, 2005).

In summary, a growth mindset generally increases – and a fixed mindset undermines – employees’ zeal for development, belief in the utility of effort, attentiveness to corrective information, and likelihood of construing “failures” as challenging and energizing, rather than undermining and debilitating.

### **Mindset and Managerial Style**

Managers’ mindsets affect how they treat their subordinates. Specifically, a growth mindset predicts a manager’s vigilance to both improvements *and* decline in employee performance (Heslin et al., 2005). Managers who do not recognize improvements are demoralizing and thereby erode employee engagement. Recognition of decreasing performance is imperative for taking needed remedial action.

When performance improvements are required, holding the fixed mindset assumption that human attributes are innate and essentially unalterable makes managers disinclined to invest effort in coaching their employees (Heslin, VandeWalle, & Latham, 2006). Related research shows that a growth mindset positively predicts managers’ perceived fairness in dealing with their employees (Heslin & VandeWalle, in press, 2010) – a critical factor for enticing employees to identify with their work and passionately invest themselves in performing it.

### **Practical Implications: Cultivating a Growth Mindset**

If fixed mindsets are so toxic to engagement, why are they still prevalent within contemporary organizations? Possible sources of fixed and growth mindsets are as follows:

#### *Organizational signals*

An organizational culture that glorifies inherent “genius” (e.g., Enron) over heroic efforts to improve (e.g., Southwest Airlines) – via cultural artifacts such as newsletters, speeches by top management, selection and promotion criteria, and award ceremonies – can elicit thoughts,

feelings and behaviors indicative of a fixed mindset (Murphy & Dweck, in press). Similarly, a strong focus on recruiting external talent with the *right stuff*, to the relative neglect of cultivating current personnel, might convey and foster a fixed mindset within both current and potential employees. Finally, a rank-and-yank appraisal system, requiring that the bottom 10-15% of employees be identified and fired, could also propagate the fixed mindset view that the abilities of those ranked the lowest can not be developed.

The alternative growth mindset conviction that employees' abilities can be stimulated to grow might be conveyed through a range of developmentally-oriented organizational programs. Examples include comprehensive on-boarding, mentoring, special assignments, multisource feedback, sponsored continuing education, and study leave programs. Publicizing inspiring profiles of real-life career journeys within the organization – focusing not only on those whose careers have led them to the upper echelons – could also serve as a powerful indicator that employee growth is possible.

### *Managerial actions*

Managers often have a powerful influence on their employees' thoughts, feelings and behavior. Telling people they did well because they are "smart", rather than because they "worked hard", can create a fixed mindset focused on not jeopardizing the treasured self-impression of being smart. Subsequent engagement and performance is diminished (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). This finding highlights the potential peril to employees' growth mindset of well-intentioned managers labeling their subordinates using ostensibly positive terms such as "star performer", "superstar" or an "A-player".

There are, however, viable alternative means of providing positively reinforcing feedback that fosters rather than erodes employees' growth mindsets. The common theme within each is

praising the *process* employees undertook to attain a good outcome (e.g., a sale or positive client evaluation), as opposed to their *traits* that enabled them to do it. Examples include underscoring to employees what they achieved when they set challenging goals, worked hard, persisted in the face of setbacks, and systematically strived to identify ways to improve. As long as such feedback is sufficiently grounded in reality to be credible, this approach to describing what employees have *done* to perform well – rather than who or what they *are* – has clear potential to foster growth mindsets.

Experienced managers (and parents) are familiar with having disengaged and demoralized employees (and children) who exhibit few positive behaviors or results to reinforce. Even in such situations, there are options available that can help convert a fixed mindset into a more growth mindset<sup>3</sup>. These include:

- *Highlighting brain potential*: Share with employees that neuropsychological research is establishing that whenever we focus our minds and learn something, new connections are established in our brains. Thus, the brain and its abilities are capable of *growing like a muscle* throughout life, whenever they are exercised properly. This message can be usefully supplemented with anecdotes of how familiar people – ultimately including yourself – have substantially developed certain abilities, sometimes beginning later in life.
- *Counter-attitudinal reflection*: Have employees identify an area (e.g., using a complex web-based application, playing golf, speaking a second language) where they had initially struggled but now perform well and with relative ease. Encourage them to explain in detail the steps they took along their developmental path (e.g., setting goals, taking risks, getting

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<sup>3</sup> That can last for at least six weeks when the following techniques are applied together (Heslin et al., 2005).

lessons, practicing hard, seeking feedback). Then ask the employee why a similar process might not work in an area where they doubt that their ability can be developed.

- *Counter-attitudinal advocacy.* Have employees identify someone they care about (e.g., a parent, child or protégé) who is struggling to believe that their ability can be cultivated. Have them write an encouraging 2-3 page message to this person in which they outline, in their own words, the reasons and evidence that abilities can be developed, including meaningful personal anecdotes such as those generated during the prior counter-attitudinal reflection exercise.
- *Inducing cognitive dissonance.* Have employees identify three instances when they observed somebody learn to do something that they earnestly thought this person could *never* do. Then invite them to ponder what could have been the implications of their doubting this person's capabilities. Leading people to reflect upon how their fixed mindset may have constrained others from realizing their potential is a compelling way to foster a growth mindset.

### *Self-development*

Employees interested in cultivating a growth mindset within themselves are encouraged to work through the four techniques just outlined. When doing so, it is worth keeping in mind that public commitments and social learning can powerfully mold personal convictions (Aronson, 1999). Thus, to get the most out of these growth mindset exercises, it is recommended that you complete them in pairs or a small group, before reading aloud and discussing your encouraging message and responses to the cognitive dissonance questions.

**Conclusion**

A growth mindset is no magic bullet for cultivating employee engagement. As with any human experience, engagement is the culmination of a vast array of factors such as those identified in the opening paragraph. This chapter nonetheless hopefully conveys the potential role of mindset in understanding and increasing employee engagement.

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