Have you ever worked hard to improve a valuable skill and made real progress, only to have your development go unnoticed by the people who told you that you needed to improve? Perhaps this led you to look for a new job. Or maybe you’re a manager who’s been
disappointed by poor performance and concluded that your low-performing employees are simply over-entitled? So you gave up on trying to help them improve and vented your frustration with colleagues behind closed doors.

Both of these commonplace experiences point to problems caused by a fixed mindset, in which we find it hard to believe that people can change. In the first scenario, an employee is judged as having low potential—and this assessment blinds leaders to the progress he’s made. In the second, the manager’s conviction that her employees will never change makes her less likely to engage in leadership behaviors that support development. The bottom line in both cases is that employees are less likely to reach their potential.

These examples illustrate the phenomenon of the self-fulfilling prophecy, where a belief triggers behaviors that make that belief more likely to come true. The self-fulfilling prophecy phenomenon is well documented in educational settings: when teachers see potential in a student, they’re more likely to pour effort into teaching that student, thereby raising his chances of academic success. Conversely, a student seen as having little potential receives less investment from teachers, and is consequently more likely to perform poorly.

But self-fulfilling prophecies can wreak havoc in the workplace as well. Leaders’ attitudes about employees affect the ways they treat them, which in turn affect the employees’ behaviors and performance. Researchers who investigated managers with a fixed mindset (who believe that employees’ attributes are innate and unchangeable) and those with a growth mindset (who believe that people can change) found that those who see employees’ capabilities as fixed were disinclined to expend effort helping them develop and improve. After all, why waste your time on a lost cause when what you see is all you’ll ever get? On the other hand, they found that managers who believe that employees are capable of growth were more likely to engage in coaching behaviors, like giving constructive feedback, supporting them in taking on new challenges, and expressing confidence in their capacity to learn and develop.
Believing that employees can change doesn’t just make managers more willing and able to coach; evidence also suggests that it makes them more accurate judges of improvements or drops in performance. Leaders with a fixed mindset are less likely to notice a change, especially in someone whom they’ve judged (either favorably or unfavorably) in the past. And this behavior can alienate top performers and undermine motivation. The people who are most committed to learning are likely to leave or disengage if learning opportunities are scarce or if their growth goes unrecognzied. On the other hand, when leaders do demonstrate a belief in people’s ability to grow, research shows that employees are more motivated to improve their performance, more satisfied with their jobs, and less likely to quit.

Lest you think that this article aims to bash managers while letting employees off the hook, let me say that the fixed mindset problem runs in both directions. Just as leaders hold beliefs about the extent to which people can change, so do employees. And they act in ways that support those beliefs. In one study, for instance, university students with a fixed mindset were less likely to recognize their instructor’s performance improvements over the course of a semester than those with a growth mindset. The pervasiveness of fixed mindsets helps to explain why leaders are sometimes frustrated when their teams are slow to notice or respond to new behaviors they’ve developed in leadership training.

The good news is that cultivating a growth mindset is possible with coaching or training. Researchers found that managers who completed a training program designed to build greater belief in the potential for employee development were subsequently more willing to coach a poorly performing employee, and also provided more and higher quality suggestions for improvement.

To foster a growth mindset in yourself, try a few of these exercises, which I use in my own leadership development work:

- Recall at least one instance when you worked hard to master something that was initially very difficult, and identify the strategies that worked best to help you learn. (This will help you appreciate your own capacity for growth.)
Think of a time when you’ve observed another person learn to do something you didn’t think they would be able to do. Analyze their learning process, if you can, or invite them to explain it to you. (This will help you recognize others’ capacity for growth.)

When you face a learning challenge, brainstorm different strategies you can use to stretch yourself, experiment with them, and keep track of what works best. (This will help you focus on the learning process and develop flexible learning strategies.)

To promote a growth mindset in your team members, have them engage in these same kinds of reflection exercises and experimentation. Additionally, you can serve as a role model by sharing your own learning challenges and strategies with your team members on a regular basis. Make discussions of how your team learns—and how it might do so more effectively—part of planning and review meetings. This is an important practice, because a focus on the process—as opposed to just the outcomes—of learning lies at the heart of a growth mindset. By recognizing when and how you and others have overcome challenges, setting development goals, and sharing learning strategies, you can boost your own learning as well as your team’s.

Finally, maintain awareness of your mindset. The next time you catch yourself saying, “There are two kinds of people in this world,” recognize that this is classic fixed-mindset thinking. Retrain your brain to switch to a growth mindset by ending the sentence this way: “There are people who believe that everyone can learn, and people who just haven’t figured that out yet.”

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