

Mindset matters: examining the difference between a *fixed* mindset and a *growth* mindset in 2021



What is exactly is a growth mindset, and why do you need one in 2021? Numerous industry experts report on the value of a growth mindset. Some call it a game changer. Others suggest that it's the key ingredient to bullet-proofing your business, especially right now.

So what's the truth? Is a growth mindset really the secret sauce your organisation needs, or has its value been greatly overestimated?

Over the course of this report we'll look at:

- Defining mindset and why it matters with **Insights L&D Consultant Neil Easton**
- Key research around growth mindset
- The differences between a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset and how they show up
- New research on growth mindset - and addressing criticism with Insights **Discovery Psychologist Danielle Cooper-Lowden**
- Myth-busting around mindset with Insights **Discovery Psychologist Aileen Brown**
- Why having a growth mindset is important at work for individuals, teams, and leaders
- Growth mindset and the four colour model
- Growth mindset and resilience

But first, let's start by introducing the idea of mindset and exactly what we mean by that...



Neil Easton, Learning and Development Consultant, Insights

What is mindset?

What do we mean by mindset? We may all have a slightly different take on how we define mindset. We could think of mindset as an established set of attitudes held by someone - or a person's way of thinking and their opinions, for example.

However, Insights' definition of mindset is this...

"A mental attitude or disposition that predetermines a person's responses to and interpretation of situations"

There are two important words in our definition of mindset that are worth looking at more closely. 'Predetermines' indicates that our response to a situation is already decided before the situation occurs. 'Interpretation' indicates that our response is not necessarily based on facts, but on our understanding or perception of the facts.

It's worth considering the impact of these two characteristics on our overall mindset.

What is mindset? A mental attitude or disposition that predetermines a person's responses to and their interpretation of situations



What impacts our mindset?

Our mindset is shaped by a number of different factors. The criteria that can inform and impact our mindset include:

- *Experiences*
- *Upbringing*
- *Cultural differences*
- *Values*
- *Education*
- *Prejudices*

These things influence the way we look at the world through our own personal filters or lenses.

In short, they inform **what we believe to be true about ourselves, the world, and other people.**

The research around growth mindset

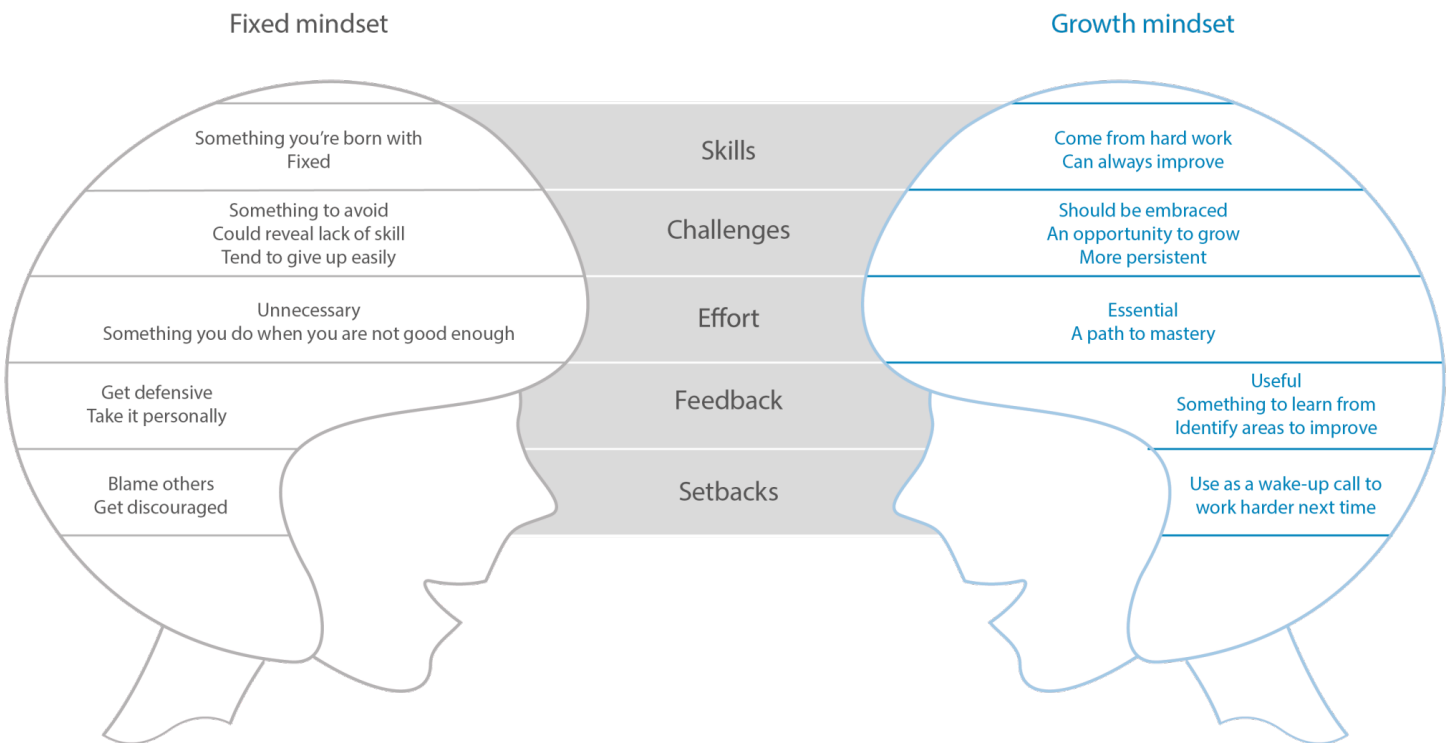
Research around the idea of mindset was ignited by the work of Dr Carol Dweck, a psychologist, researcher, and professor at Stanford University. Her magnum opus is the 2006 publication *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, which changed the game in terms of how we think about mindset. In it, she explores the impact mindset can have on our success and the fundamental differences between two different kinds of mindset: a growth mindset and a fixed mindset.

Put simply, it can be explained like this: someone with a fixed mindset believes that success is based on innate ability. On the other hand, someone with a growth mindset believes the opposite; they believe that success can be achieved through hard work, learning, and development.

An individual with a fixed mindset believes that success is based on innate ability.

An individual with a growth mindset believes the opposite; that success can be achieved through hard work, learning, and development.

The key differences between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset...



With a fixed mindset...

- Individuals with a fixed mindset will often feel **the need to prove themselves** over and over again in order to fulfil the expected behavioural requirements and appear successful. They may go to extreme lengths to achieve this through behaviours such as cheating (Blackwell et al, 2007) and cutting corners (Murphy et al, 2016)
- They're driven by and oriented towards performance goals and **the favourable judgements of others**, which are based on their level of competence or ability (Blackwell et al, 2007, Erdley et al, 1997)
- If they can't achieve their goals or be successful in gaining favourable judgements from others, it may result in **defensive behaviours to hide their perceived failure** (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, Wan, 1999) or enforce the belief that they are incompetent and thus decrease confidence (Dweck 1999).
- With a fixed mindset, **effort is a sign of weakness**. This, combined with their concern about being and looking good, means that they will never fulfil their potential (Dweck 2009).



With a growth mindset...

- Individuals have the capacity to learn and develop a particular characteristic or ability – and **their true potential is unknown** (Dweck, 2006).
- Having a growth mindset **enhances motivation** as you believe you can improve your ability through increased effort (Murphy & Dweck, 2016).
- Individuals with a growth mindset are **driven by the desire to learn** and increase their mastery over a particular skill or ability (Erdley et al, 1997).
- **Failures are part of the learning process** so individuals are more willing to make mistakes and appear foolish in order to achieve the goal of learning (Blackwell Trzesniewski & Dweck, 2007).

Dweck on the power of 'yet'...

She says: "I heard about a high school in Chicago where students had to pass a certain number of courses to graduate, and if they didn't pass a course, they got the grade "Not Yet."

And I thought that was fantastic, because if you get a failing grade, you think, I'm nothing, I'm nowhere.

"But if you get the grade "Not Yet" you understand that you're on a learning curve. It gives you a path into the future."¹

Growth mindset in 2021

It's important to note there is a degree of scepticism around the theory of growth mindset, with many reports calling it simplistic or pointing to a lack of measurable results. With that said, there has been some new research this year which shows that **growth mindset theory may in fact be the real deal**. Forbes² reports...

"The latest research in its favour was published [...] by the OECD, which incorporated a growth mindset element in the latest iteration of its long-running Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study, designed to measure and compare performance of 15-year-olds and seen as a litmus test of education systems.

"As well as answering questions on reading, science and math, students were also asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement "Your intelligence is something about you that you can't change very much."

"Those who disagreed with the statement were seen as having a stronger growth mindset than those who agreed. Student responses were then cross-referenced to their test scores, to reveal a **positive correlation between growth mindset and academic performance**."

In short, growth mindset can be a powerful tool. But it's also something we have to make sure we contextualise - particularly when people are working amidst challenging circumstances...

New research published by OECD this year shows a **positive correlation** between a growth mindset and academic performance



Danielle Cooper-Lowden, Discovery Psychologist, Insights

"There are well-known criticisms of growth mindset, specifically in the world of education. Telling children that their academic ability is not fixed, and that they can achieve anything they want with hard work and the right attitude might sound like a great motivational concept, but it's not realistic.

"Social issues play a big part and if children don't have the home environment to support their learning, no amount of growth mindset is going to change that. This can also invalidate their experiences and leave them feeling like a failure for not having the right attitude or not working hard enough to overcome their obstacles.

"For adults, working during this pandemic is another example of where pushing the idea of a growth mindset can be challenging. For some, it would have been such a difficult experience that a growth mindset would feel impossible to instil, and again, invalidate their feelings."



Aileen Brown, Discovery
Psychologist, Insights

Myth-busting about mindset

It's also important to interrogate some of the misconceptions around mindset. Although there are many occasions when having a growth mindset is key, there are times when a fixed mindset can serve you too...

1) A fixed mindset isn't always negative - it can be about self-preservation

"When we think about having either a growth or fixed mindset, we can think of one as positive and the other negative; a growth mindset being positive and a fixed mindset being negative.

"However, in the face of adversity or in such an unusual circumstances like the pandemic, it's completely understandable that some people may slip into more of a fixed mindset. In fact, shying away from challenges may be self-protective in the short term. Staying in a zone where you feel comfortable and safe might be exactly what you need to get through a situation where there is already so much change and uncertainty.

"Additionally, when the whole world feels like it's in a negative place, it can be exhausting trying to keep a positive growth mindset when the world feels like it's knocking you back. We don't have to pile more pressure on ourselves!"

2) A fixed mindset can also help to build your confidence

"We may adopt more of a fixed mindset in situations that we're unfamiliar with to gain confidence in what we're doing before we jump in. But we can also take inspiration from those who are more comfortable with characteristics of a growth mindset. For example, someone who enjoys learning from mistakes rather than needing everything to be perfect - or embraces setbacks and enjoys being pushed and challenged."

3) A fixed mindset isn't actually fixed

"The funny thing about a fixed mindset is that it's not really fixed. If an individual has found themselves leaning towards a fixed mindset they can re-frame how they look at the situation - something I have experience of myself..."

"During the pandemic, many of us had to pick up extra work - myself included. For me personally, some of this was really out of my comfort zone and quite unnerving [and I found myself leaning towards more of a fixed mindset.] However, what triggered a change in mindset was connecting with my colleagues and sharing how I felt.

"Knowing that everything I did didn't have to be an overwhelming success took a lot of the pressure off. I started doing things I hadn't done before and the quality of my work also improved as I embraced more of an iterative approach."

A growth mindset or fixed mindset **are not absolutes** - they're a continuum where we adopt a growth mindset in some circumstances and a fixed mindset in others

Why is a growth mindset important at work?

We've talked at length about a growth mindset now, so now let's look at it in the context of the world of work. Why is a growth mindset important? Is it important? In a word, yes.

According to research undertaken by Harvard Business Review³, employees who work at 'growth mindset' organisations are **34% likelier to feel a strong sense of ownership and commitment to the company, 49% likelier to say that the company fosters innovation, and 65% likelier to say that the company supports risk-taking**, amongst other benefits.

There are, of course, a number of scenarios when a growth mindset could be useful at work:

- Onboarding new team members
- Team members leaving
- Teams rapidly increasing or decreasing in size
- Increased pace or heavier workload
- Increased complexity of role
- Change of rules / processes
- Teammates or other stakeholders who are challenging to work with
- Working remotely or blended

For individuals, teams, and leaders there are widespread benefits of having a growth mindset...

Employees who work at growth mindset organisations are **34% likelier to feel a strong sense of ownership and commitment** to the company and are 49% likelier to say that the company fosters innovation, according to Harvard Business Review

Individuals with a growth mindset...

There's a certain degree of self-interest in developing a growth mindset at work. This article by Forbes refers to a piece of research done by Deloitte and the World Economic Forum⁴.

It reports that skills that had a half-life of 30 years now have a shelf-life of less than six years, which means that **an employee will need to reskill seven times throughout their career**. We've touched on the different views on learning and development between those with a fixed mindset and those with growth mindset, and so it's not a huge leap to say those with the latter will be better equipped to face these challenges.

Ultimately, those who are more adaptable to change in the workplace are more employable.

Teams with a growth mindset

Why do teams need a growth mindset? Well, Harvard Business Review wrote about how the challenges teams face are often the biggest catalysts for growth⁵. In their own words:

"As teams are forced to take on new challenges, face new uncertainties, and recover from mistakes in the Covid-19 era, they begin to internalize that both their own abilities and those of their peers are not fixed, but rather can be developed."

However, it's also about creating that culture of learning where people aren't afraid to fail. It's critical we switch our preoccupation with proving ourselves – and focus on improving ourselves.

Leaders with a growth mindset

Mindset also matters when it comes to your leadership style, with Forbes calling it the 'underestimated game changer for leaders.'⁶

They write about how leaders with a fixed mindset have all the hallmarks of poor leadership; they throw their weight around, create a culture of fear, and have an overall lack of awareness about their overall capability.

On the other hand, leaders with a growth mindset **enjoy collaboration, want to surround themselves with people who challenge them, and are acutely self-aware⁵**. In a nutshell, they know their strengths and their weaknesses.

"Failure is
to be avoided
at all costs"

"Failure is
an opportunity
for growth"

"If things
are too hard,
I give up"

"If things
are too hard,
I ask for help"

Fixed mindset

Growth mindset



Growth mindset and self-awareness

So how does a growth mindset relate to the idea of self-awareness? Does it relate?

Well, pretty much anything you read will tell you that self-awareness is a key component of developing a growth mindset.

At Insights, we're big believers in the power of self-awareness. In fact, we believe self-awareness is key to unlocking your true potential. You can only show up at your best when understand yourself, understand others, and when you know what you need to get the most out of your working relationships, right?

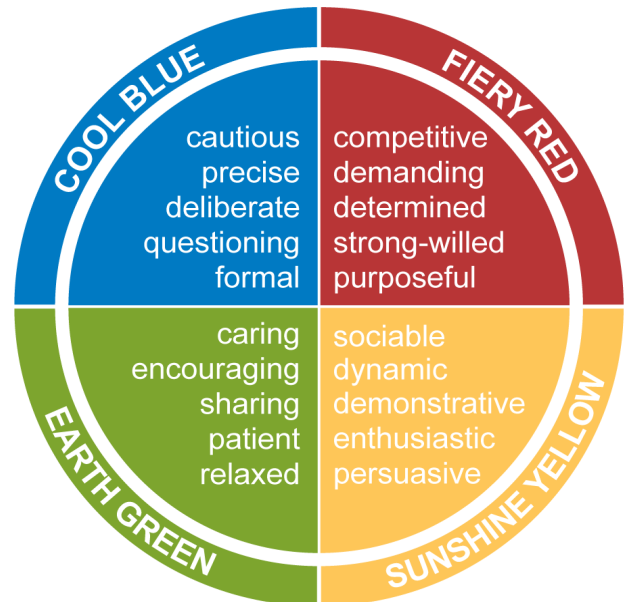
Let's explore that in a little more detail...

Insights self-awareness methodology

The Insights Discovery methodology is grounded in the psychology of Carl Jung. We use a simple and memorable four colour model to help people understand their personal communication style, their strengths and the value they bring to the team.

We call these the colour energies, and we believe that it's the unique mix of what we call Fiery Red, Sunshine Yellow, Earth Green and Cool Blue energies that inform how we show up; it's our natural preference for one over the other that influences our motivations and behaviour.

Insights four colour model



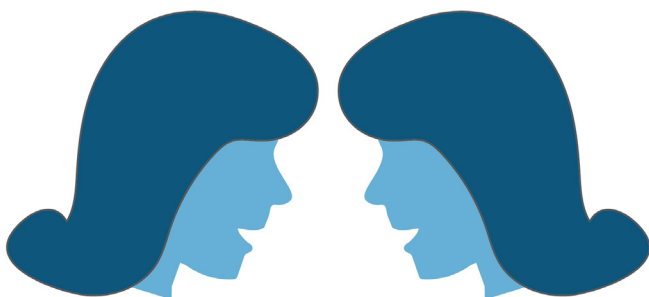
Colour energy strengths

Cool Blue: Cautious, precise, deliberate, questioning, formal

Fiery Red: Competitive, demanding, determined, strong-willed, purposeful

Sunshine Yellow: Sociable, dynamic, demonstrative, enthusiastic, persuasive

Earth Green: Caring, encouraging, sharing, patient, relaxed



Does self-awareness automatically lead to a growth mindset?

In a word, no. One really important point to make is that self-awareness isn't enough to lead a growth mindset on its own. You can be self-aware... but not have a growth mindset.

Forbes get it right when they say that self-awareness functions as a starting point for growth. "You can't grow without a benchmark understanding of your current state". But you have to DO something with your self-awareness to develop a growth mindset; it won't just appear!

"Some people can use their **self-awareness to support their fixed mindset**. To enable a growth mindset, we should use our self-awareness to understand our natural abilities, but also those things that might be a bit trickier for us and understand we can get better at them if we put in the work."



Danielle Cooper-Lowden, Discovery Psychologist, Insights

"Insights is a brilliant tool for self-awareness, but the key to developing a growth-mindset is being aware of your blind spots and development opportunities to allow you to see beyond your own preferences.

"Some people can use their self-awareness to support their fixed mindset. For example, **'I lead with Fiery Red so I'll never be considered a people person'**, or 'I have such high Earth Green energy so I try to avoid conflict'

"To enable a growth mindset, we should use our self-awareness to understand our natural abilities, but also those things that might be a bit trickier for us and **understand we can get better at them if we put in the work**.

"That person with the high Earth Green energy who wants to change their approach to conflict can adopt a growth mindset by understanding that, whilst conflict and challenging conversations may not be their preference, their strong awareness of their values will enable them to bravely step into difficult conversations to communicate challenges and set boundaries that can facilitate change."

"Someone with high Fiery Red energy can learn to be more empathic and work on balancing people and task issues. Remember, we all have all four of the colour energies within us, it's just that some are more accessible to us than others."



Growth mindset *strengths* when we're channelling...

Cool Blue energy: Data-driven and logical, we want every decision we make to be the right one. We'll ask questions and make sure we have what we need before acting.

Fiery Red energy: Task-focused and driven, we always want to make an impact – and so we cut through the noise and keep everyone focused in order to make that happen.

Sunshine Yellow energy: Outgoing and dynamic, we love collaborating and bringing in the expertise of others – we're also skilled at getting that crucial stakeholder buy-in.

Earth Green energy: Compassionate and collaborative, we thrive in a harmonious working environment. We'll do what we can to create a safe space where everyone can perform at their best.

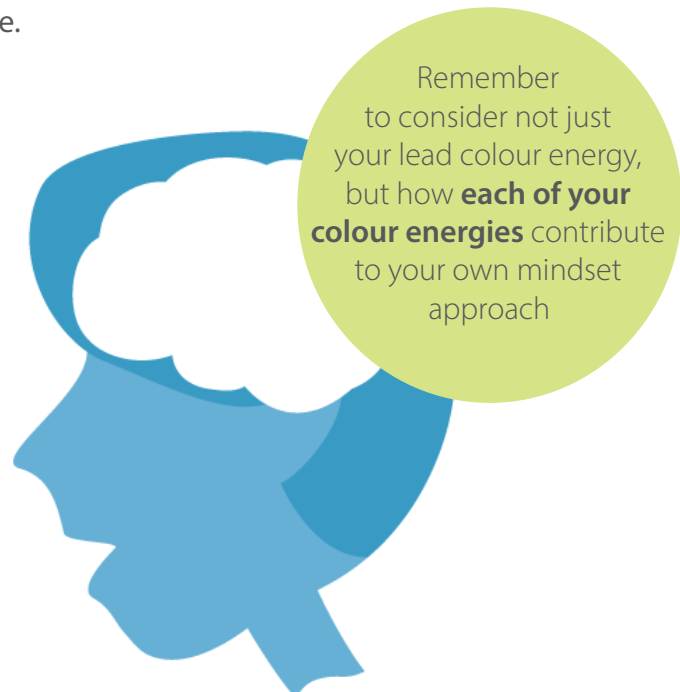
Growth mindset *challenges* when we're channelling..

Cool Blue energy: We may be more reticent to collaborate or share incomplete work with colleagues. Our preference for asking questions can be perceived as slowing things down.

Fiery Red energy: We can be quick to dive in and make an impact as soon as possible – which can at times be perceived as too autocratic. We don't have to go with the first idea.

Sunshine Yellow energy: We're all about the big and bold ideas – but we can become frustrated by others who don't buy into our vision or who are more naturally cautious.

Earth Green energy: We can doubt our own gifts and talents and not challenge others robustly enough. We can sometimes play it safe rather than put ourselves out there.



Remember to consider not just your lead colour energy, but how **each of your colour energies** contribute to your own mindset approach

Growth mindset and *resilience*

How does a growth mindset relate to resilience? Well, resilience is about adaptability and being able to constantly flex, change, and evolve over time. A fixed mindset is the opposite.

As this report⁷ notes, “A fixed mindset doesn’t easily allow you to change course. You believe that someone either has ‘it’ or they don’t: it’s a very binary frame of mind.” With a growth mindset, we believe that we can all change, shift, and adapt as and when we need to.

However, that’s not to say that resilience and a growth mindset are the same thing...



“Resilience is all about being able to bounce back when things don’t go as planned. I think all of us have had to draw on resilience a lot during this past year, whether we had a growth mindset or not.

“I would say that having a growth mindset does have some similar qualities to how we would think about resilience. Learning to take criticism as a positive can

foster a more resilient mindset in how we approach projects. Not being afraid to fail is also a big part of a growth mindset – and we also link this to a more resilient person.

“What I think we need to be careful about is to not state that a growth mindset is *exclusively* linked to resilience.”

**Aileen Brown, Insights
Discovery Psychologist**

1) You can be resilient with a fixed mindset - or a growth mindset

**Danielle Cooper-Lowden,
Insights Discovery Psychologist**

“As an example, someone could appear resilient if they have come out of a challenging time unchanged – but that doesn’t necessarily mean they have a growth mindset. It could be that their **fixed mindset just so happens to have carried them safely through this event.**”

“On the other hand, someone else could come out of a challenging situation looking quite different. Perhaps they have had to learn new skills to get through. Maybe they have had to really work on dialling up their inferior energies to support them through a situation out of their comfort zone. This is still resilience – they have survived – but achieved through **adaptability and a growth mindset** which reassures them that they are capable of change.”

2) A growth mindset can help us be more open to innovation

“Broadly speaking, a growth-mindset can help us in challenging circumstances. If the world is changing and we’re refusing to change with it, there’s a possibility we’ll be left behind and unhappy.

“For example, if Insights had insisted that our customer accreditations had to be done in person and the whole calendar was put on hold until the pandemic was over, then that calendar would still be on hold, our clients would be missing out on learning, and we would never have known what a roaring success virtual accreditations could be.

“Having a **growth mindset helps us to be open to solutions and innovation**, rather than staying stuck in the things that we can’t control.”

“A growth mindset doesn’t mean you have to **fundamentally change the make-up of your psyche.**

It’s about being open-minded and adaptable when necessary”

3) We recently found out that 71% of learners who retook the Insights Discovery evaluator have changed wheel position... but you don’t ‘have’ to change wheel position

“Acknowledging that we can change over time is one thing, but it doesn’t necessarily mean you’ve adopted a growth mindset to get there. It would also suggest that **people who don’t change wheel positions have a fixed mindset which wouldn’t be accurate.**”

“A growth mindset doesn’t mean you have to fundamentally change the make-up of your psyche. It’s about being **open-minded and adaptable when necessary.**”

“However, you don’t need to be constantly on the path of change **if your current preferences are serving you well.**”

7 important *takeaways* on mindset

1. Our mindset is influenced by a number of different things which influence and inform how we see **ourselves, others, and the world.**

2. According to research, you can either have **a fixed mindset or a growth mindset.** With a fixed mindset you believe success is based on innate ability, with a growth mindset, you believe anything can be learned.

3. There is some criticism of growth mindset theory and it's important to recognise that it's **not realistic** for individuals to be able to practise a growth mindset at all times.

4. A **fixed mindset** isn't always a negative thing - it can support individuals through challenging situations in the short term. It's also not as fixed as you may think!



5. Research states that a growth mindset at work can lead to **increased innovation** – and enhance performance of individuals, teams, and leaders.

6. Self-awareness can be part of having a growth mindset, but it's not enough on its own. You can actually use your self-awareness to **facilitate a fixed mindset.**

7. Similarly, resilience has similar characteristics of a growth mindset, but it's not the same. You **can be resilient** while practising a fixed mindset!

Endnotes

- 1 <https://fs.blog/2015/03/carol-dweck-mindset/>
- 2 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nickmorrison/2021/04/08/growth-mindset-the-classroom-gimmick-that-could-be-the-real-deal/>
- 3 <https://hbr.org/2014/11/how-companies-can-profit-from-a-growth-mindset>
- 4 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2020/05/15/the-growth-mindset-spurring-a-more-skilled-engaged-and-innovative-workforce/>
- 5 <https://hbr.org/2020/08/5-ways-a-crisis-can-help-you-cultivate-a-growth-mindset>
- 6 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2021/05/06/growth-mindset-an-underestimated-game-changer-for-leaders/>
- 7 <https://fs.blog/2016/11/workplace-mindset/>