

# GROWTH VS. FIXED MINDSET – WHY IT MATTERS AT WORK

- ▲ **Mindset affects performance**
- ▲ **Fear of Failure inhibits innovation and accountability**
- ▲ **Fear and shame are hallmarks of a fixed mindset**



A reporter asked me the other day about the impact of a growth vs fixed mindset at work. She wanted to know: What do you wish all teams knew about cultivating a growth mindset? What are some key differences between a growth and fixed mindset at work, and why are they important? What are examples of situations where a growth mindset benefits a team and examples of situations when a fixed mindset holds a team back?

## I Like Pie

**I asked her about her favorite pie. When she told me, I said, “What happens when you eat some?”**

**Fixed Mindset is like that Pecan pie.** There is only so much, and there isn't any more. If you fail at something, then it's like losing a slice. And then there is less. So, the last thing you want to do is make a mistake and have less pie. Everyone is extra-careful; nobody wants to make a mistake, put a foot wrong, do something others might think is stupid. In other words, shrink the pie.

**A growth mindset is like a pie that can expand.** If you make a mistake, you can learn from it and, even though a slice was taken, it can actually make the pie bigger! That “fixed” pie reflects limiting beliefs, holding us back from higher performance. The “growing” pie represents liberating beliefs that free us to achieve more without the fear and shame of failure.

## On the Record

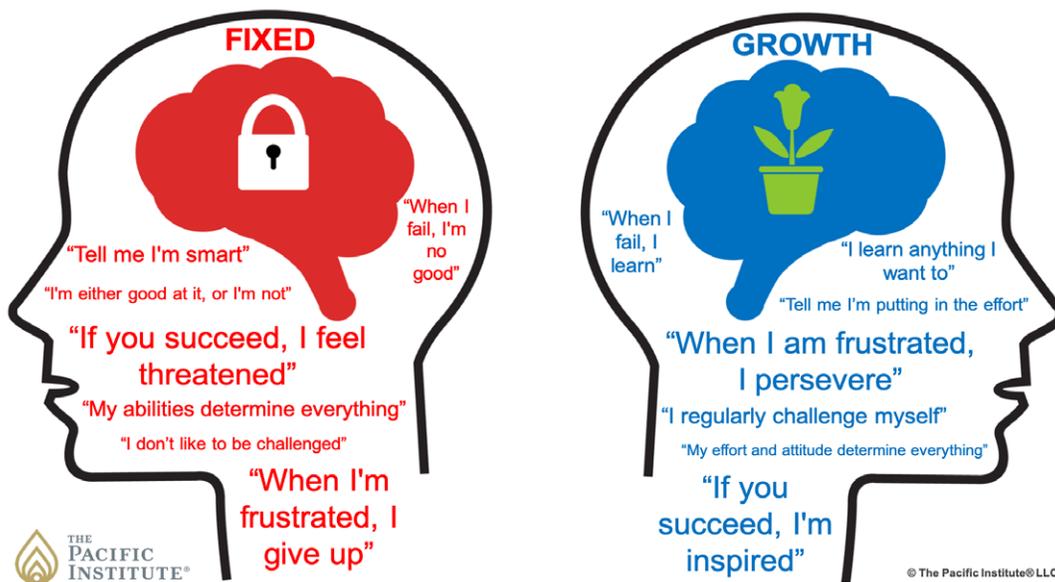
Responding to the reporter, this is what I told her:

1

**What do you wish all teams knew about cultivating a growth mindset?** One of the big challenges in improving performance is “error correction and reduction.” Six Sigma focuses on this. Michigan State Basketball Coach Tom Izzo strongly supports creating a “player-coached team.” The members work together to help each other improve, innovate, reduce errors. This works equally well for business teams. Challenges can arise when members point out ways others in the group can get better. Unfortunately, ego spikes can create resistance, pushback and reduce team “flow.” When the members have truly incorporated a growth mindset, and constructive suggestions are focused on team betterment, continuous improvement dynamics can flourish. The key to success is trust that the members have the good of the others at heart.

2

**What are some key differences between a growth and fixed mindset at work, and why are they important?** A central feature of a fixed mindset is avoiding errors, whereas growth mindsets accept that errors occur and seek to improve by learning what to do better in the future. The rigidity of “not making a mistake” limits innovation and appropriate risk-taking that spur development and growth. One of the primary reasons that people leave an organization is to pursue growth and development. Although they might prefer to remain, absent this kind of development effort by their employer, they will seek the opportunity to grow elsewhere. Another limiting facet of fixed mindsets is the belief that “you either have it or you don’t.” Thus, if people fail in an effort, others may “write them off” in a specific area rather than help develop them for the future. In a time when talented employees are scarce, a fixed mindset prevents developing individuals, resulting in excess turnover.





3

**Can you name examples of situations where a growth mindset benefits a team?** One of the classic examples of a team benefiting from a growth mindset occurred at least twice in NASA's space program. During the original Apollo mission that took astronauts to the moon, the capsule was only on its proper trajectory 20% of the time. The other 80% was consumed with multiple mid-course corrections or "learnings." During the Apollo 13 crisis, engineers had to wrestle with an electronic limitation in the number of Ohms that could be sustained when bringing the dormant computers back online. They "failed forward" repeatedly until they found the appropriate solution.

4

**What about examples of situations when a fixed mindset holds a team back?** In an athletic context, playing not to lose. In 2009, Cornell's lacrosse team enjoyed a five goal lead over Syracuse in the second half of the NCAA Championship game. Instead of continuing to play its aggressive style of attack that had created such a big lead, Jeff Tambroni's team opted to "swallow the ball," attempting to run out the clock. Little by little, Syracuse, playing with a growth mindset, climbed back into the game and, with two seconds remaining in regulation time, scored an extraordinary goal to tie the game. In sudden victory overtime, Syracuse scored to take the trophy. Similarly, this shows up in business when organizations become rule bound. They become so focused on staying within the rules that even if there is a problem, the rigid adherence to the rules prevents them from modifying them to better suit the situation. This often happens in manufacturing, where compliance can get in the way of proper performance.

**Growth mindsets open the door to exponential growth. Is your pie "fixed" or growing?**

# Engagement Isn't Written In Job Descriptions

