

# FALSE GROWTH MINDSET

Why Did My Growth Mindset Programme Fail



John Rives



### WHY DID MY GROWTH MINDSET PROGRAMME FAIL?



The research of Professor Carol Dweck (Stanford University) has demonstrated that organisations with a growth mindset have greater levels of engagement, productivity, integrity and diversity.

In this article we explore Prof. Dweck's latest research on designing effective mindset interventions to avoid a "false growth mindset" culture.

Why did our growth mindset programme fail to change our culture? We are getting asked this question so often that we decided we needed to talk about it.

What if we could avoid the outbreak of a "false growth mindset" that undermines the success of so many growth mindset initiatives? While it is true that we are increasingly the first choice for many clients when it comes to partnering on growth mindset, we still get a lot of emails asking for help because their current programme is doing more harm than good.

The biggest problem with most approaches is that they try and banish a fixed mindset. The CEO declares that a growth mindset is now one of the business's top priorities. Banners go up. Websites are updated. Maybe a podcast goes out to the masses, declaring that a growth mindset is now one of the company's top priorities. What happens next?

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Because a growth mindset intervention seeks to create a world of new meanings, an important theme is that it is not sufficient to simply “teach the facts” of a growth mindset and then expect people to change.



Prof. Carol Dweck 2021

Overnight everyone learns to parrot growth mindset language. Suddenly, every employee espouses to be 100% growth mindset! The only people who might admit to having a fixed mindset are actually the ones most likely to have a genuine growth mindset.

A fixed mindset is still there in abundance, however, and now it's gone underground. It is hidden beneath the surface, where it is even harder to detect and change.

It makes sense, doesn't it? The message goes out that to be successful I need my manager to *believe* that I have a growth mindset. My fixed mindset self knows how to play the game! “Yes, I have a growth mindset. I love failure and setbacks. Feedback, bring it on.” But change the way I think and behave? No thanks. The easy path is to talk the talk and wait for this latest trend to die off, and we can all get back to playing it safe, competing for that promotion and working against each other to get ahead.

## **Suddenly everyone espouses to be 100% growth mindset.**

My Co-Founder, Susan Mackie, declared this an outbreak of false growth mindset. Google it if you want to – it's there for everyone to see. Prof. Dweck, the world's leading growth mindset researcher at Stanford University, attributes the discovery of false growth mindset to Susan in her work. So, how do you avoid creating a false growth mindset in your organisation?

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Prof. Dweck provides some valuable thoughts in the “Handbook of Wise Interventions” published in February 2021. Yep, just two months ago. Here are the key concepts she discusses regarding designing effective mindset interventions.

## EPIC FAILURE NUMBER ONE!

It's not a TELL. In the early days, we call it Mindset 1.0, we made some big mistakes. Prof. Dweck captures the idea beautifully in the book.

*“Because a growth mindset intervention seeks to create a world of new meanings, an important theme is that it is not sufficient to simply “teach the facts” of a growth mindset and then expect people to change. This approach creates a “false growth mindset.”*

## **False growth mindset is when people fear admitting they have a fixed mindset.**

Okay, it's time to come clean. This is precisely what we used to do about six years ago. Tell them the facts about growth mindset, hit them with some information about how the brain works when you fail and finish up with a healthy dose of why this is important to their future happiness. Job done, see you next week!

What an epic failure on our part. We fanned the flames of a false growth mindset, and people were buying it. We didn't realise how difficult it is to create a genuine growth mindset culture. So, what does Mindset 2.0 look like?

## FIXED MINDSET TRIGGERS

Who would have believed that the crucial part of teaching people to have a growth mindset is to focus on their fixed mindsets?

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In hindsight, it makes perfect sense. When people have a growth mindset response to a challenge or setback, get out of their way and let them get on with it. It's when they have a fixed mindset response that they need help.

When their motivation plummets, and they run from a challenge or hunker down in their comfort zone. That is when they need to be able to re-frame their response from fixed to growth.

People are constantly triggered into a fixed mindset response by their environment. If you're honest with yourself, you know there are times you avoid challenges and let a setback get the better of you. We all have fixed mindset triggers, and we need to embrace them and learn to manage them.

**Rather than banning the fixed mindset,  
we should embrace it and own it.**

A false growth mindset is born from the idea that having a fixed mindset is terrible. We need to normalise that we move between growth and a fixed mindset every day. We are a mixture of both. Learning to recognise when our fixed mindset influences the choices we make is a necessary step to take. Rather than banning the fixed mindset, we should embrace it and own it. Get people to talk about it and share their insights.

It turns out that there are eight common fixed mindset triggers. These triggers are belief systems that we develop through our experiences. Most of us have at least one dominant trigger. It could be how you deal with effort, challenges, feedback or a setback.

Here's what Prof. Dweck has to say about triggers:

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*“To be effective, interventions must resonate with people’s experiences. They must place people’s experiences within the growth- mindset-meaning system. The intervention needs to help people recognise and reflect on their triggers.”*

Learning what triggers people into a fixed mindset is key because it allows them to recognise when it happens. It also makes it normal to admit that you have a fixed mindset sometimes. We all do. This approach shines a spotlight on the real issue. No one is 100% growth mindset, so let’s not pretend that we are.

We worked with Prof. Carol Dweck, Stanford University, and Dr. Mary Murphy, Indiana University, to validate the fixed mindset triggers in a set of studies in 2018/19. This led to the development of our Mindset Profiler.

The Mindset Profiler is an online survey that gives people insights into which of the eight fixed mindset triggers are most active for them. It took us three years to develop, and that was a significant risk for us. But we couldn’t see any other way to avoid creating a false growth mindset.

**No one is 100% growth mindset,  
so let’s not pretend that we are.**

### EPIC FAILURE NUMBER TWO!

So, we have the Mindset Profiler up and running, and we’re helping people understand their fixed mindset triggers. Fantastic! It works, and people can reflect on their triggers.

What next? “Hey, you’ve got a problem with feedback. Try and get better at that.” Not very helpful, is it? People felt helpless.

We had to go back to the research to try and find the missing link. Once people identify their trigger how do we give them the ability to manage it?

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## IT IS ALL ABOUT STRATEGIES

We learnt that people need more effective strategies that they can use to manage their triggers. They needed to recognise when their fixed mindset is triggered and then have some proven strategies for managing their trigger.

Sounds simple right?

Well, it's anything but simple. We had to develop some principles for designing effective strategies.

## DESIGNING EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

### **Evidence-based**

No shortcuts. Do the work and seek out well-developed research and reference the research, so everyone knows the science behind the strategy.

### **Keep it simple**

We know that most people are busy with work and life. They don't have time to read research articles on psychology to use a strategy. They need to be able to grasp the concept in under five minutes and apply it right away.

### **Give them a choice**

Look around you. We're not all the same. We don't look the same, and we don't think the same. Some people love to journal, and others hate the idea. We need enough strategies so that everyone can find a strategy that works for them.

There are 32 strategies at the moment. Here's one to give you an idea about how they work. It's called "30/90 Feedback".

Like me, people with a feedback trigger tend to hold back their work. I refine it until I am confident that it's good enough to share. I invest myself deeply in the product until I believe that I will get praise for my efforts. In short, it defines me.

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This is precisely the opposite of what people like me should be doing. If I put all of me into a product – this is me on a plate – and I get negative feedback, ouch! That hurts, and I start to debate it or dismiss it altogether. Then the cycle repeats itself over and over. Just ask my family and friends if you don't believe me!

Instead, what if I shared my work early? Instead of when it's 90% complete, get it out there when it's 30% complete. It could be just some bullet points or rough notes. Get feedback as early as possible before investing too much time and effort. Ask questions like, "Hey am I missing anything?" or "Is there something here that I don't need to worry about?"

Practising 30/90 Feedback builds a feedback muscle. People go into it expecting to get feedback that will improve the final product. The focus is on learning versus proving you're good enough. Start using it today! No extra effort. No training programme required.

30/90 Feedback is a good strategy. It's simple. It's quick. And it's effective.

Here's what Prof. Dweck says about strategies.

*"People who practice strategic resourcing tend to strategise which resources they should use. They strategise which resources they should use to make their learning, goal pursuit and work more effective."*

### HOW TO AVOID FALSE GROWTH MINDSET

It took us years to understand and develop interventions that avoid a false growth mindset. Here are the basic principles that we learnt along the way and are aligned with Prof. Dweck's current research.



# Why Did My Growth Mindset Programme Fail

## 1. Embrace a fixed mindset

Avoid creating a culture where a fixed mindset is banned from existing. It will send it underground, and then it's even harder to manage.

## 2. Recognise your triggers

Help people to recognise and learn to self-reflect what triggers their fixed mindset. Get everyone to talk about it and embrace it. Shine a spotlight on your fixed mindset and own it.

## 3. Evidence-based strategies

Provide well-evidenced strategies to help people move into a more persistent growth mindset. Recognising a fixed mindset trigger isn't enough. It's important to know when the trigger is active and have a strategy to manage it.

## 4. Progress not perfection

It's okay to fail. No matter how good the strategy is, we have those days when a fixed mindset rules us, which is a moment for self-compassion. We have a strategy for that – it's called *“progress over perfection”*. See those moments as opportunities to learn and grow and strive to be better not perfect.

## Discovering “false growth mindset” was a gift.

We have a lot more to learn about growth mindset and how to help it flourish within people and organisations. We are constantly learning and making mistakes along the way. You can be confident that when we make mistakes, we will own them and work even harder to fix them. For now, we believe that our early mistakes made us better and that discovering the “false growth mindset” was a gift.

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If you're curious and want to learn more, these two articles are helpful:


Personal and Organisational Mindsets at Work. Mary Murphy, Stephanie L. Reeves. Published in Research in Organisational Behaviour. 2020.

Mindsets: A View from Two Eras. David S. Yeager, Carol S. Dweck. Published in Perspectives on Psychological Science. February 2020.

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"You don't get a growth mindset by proclamation. You move toward it by taking a journey."

Carol Dweck

For more information on growth mindset programmes for your business, please contact us at:

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