

Belgium: Growth Mindset and the link with the counselling and assessment of the VDAB, the Flemish Employment Counselling Services

Introduction

Title: Growth Mindset

Country: Originally a theory developed by an American Professor of Psychology. In Flanders (Belgium) it is used by the Employment Counselling Services.

Type of tool: Growth Mindset is not so much a tool but the understanding that we can develop our abilities and intelligence. Research has shown that our implicit beliefs about the nature of intelligence can have a great impact on our achievement. Growth Mindset leads to a focus on learning, increased effort and a willingness to learn from mistakes. It is a theory that ideally forms the ground of any type of inclusive assessment tool.

Target group: Any individual regardless of their socio-economical context. Both assessors and assesseees are targeted.

Potential transferability: It is now actively applied in the context of the Flemish employment counselling but it is originally meant for any educational context.

Organisation and description of the tool

Regardless of the tool, we have to first think about the vision on how we look at people. This underlying vision will influence the assessment method used and the way it is used. Nowadays, more and more assessments tend to use the “growth mindset” theory of Carol Dweck as an underlying philosophy.

As a young researcher, Carol Dweck was fascinated by how some children faced challenges and failures with aplomb while others shrunk back. Dweck, now a psychologist at Stanford University, eventually identified two core mindsets, or beliefs, about one’s own traits that shape how people approach challenges: fixed mindset, the belief that one’s abilities were carved in stone and predetermined at birth, and growth mindset, the belief that one’s skills and qualities could be cultivated through effort and perseverance. Her findings brought the concepts of “fixed” and “growth” mindset to the fore for educators and parents, inspiring the implementation of her ideas among teachers - and even companies – across the country.

Growth Mindset is the basic ground on looking at a person, not in terms of good or wrong or what is there and what is not, from the perspective of where the person is situated on the way to learning, to a future and what that person needs to grow. Employers and staff in educational institutions who can implement this mindset as underlying basis of their practices, allow learners to grow, to develop, to learn, to move out of their comfort zone and engage in new initiatives.

Growth Mindset is opposed to Fixed Mindset. In a fixed mindset people believe their basic abilities, their intelligence, their talents, are just fixed traits. They have a certain amount and that’s that, and then their goal becomes to look smart all the time and never look dumb. Fixed Mindset individuals are afraid of failure because it is a negative statement on their basic abilities, while Growth Mindset individuals don’t fear failure but consider it as a learning experience.

Implementation

The mindset of the educator is a lever to in-depth learning. It is the responsibility of educators to create a safe context in which a Growth Mindset can flourish. One can say that both the educator as the learner should work towards a Growth Mindset.

Effective teachers and trainers who have learners in a Growth Mindset are always supporting the learner's learning strategies and showing how strategies created that success. "Focus on the learning process and show how hard work, good strategies, and good use of resources lead to better learning." Growth Mindset is the basis for inclusion: it focusses on "everyone". Everyone is able to do something and the coach needs to believe in everyone. Believing in a client makes the client persisting in what s/he does. It is not about extra chances, exceptional procedures or special measures.

Effective assessment methods are those who lead people to further learning or further growing into a job. Growth Mindset is the common ground for these assessment methods. The assessor needs to create an environment in which the assessee feels safe enough to grow, to fail, to learn from mistakes, to receive feedback and to take up new challenges and tasks, even if they are feeling uncomfortable at first instance.

Description of the target group

Target group of the Growth Mindset theory are employers, educators and the jobseeker him/herself for assessing or developing any kind of skills, knowledge, practical assignments & learning opportunities; whether in formal, informal or non-formal education and training or in a professional setting. In essence, the assessor's view on failure is important. Does the assessor allow a person to fail, to learn from it, to receive feedback on it, and to do it again? Generally employers are more open to failure than the formal education sector. Actually, a person that recognises its own failures and learns from them, is also a person that can handle failures and is willing to take risks and engage in new opportunities.

In line of this, an assessor should not ask "what are your ICT-competences?" or "What are your experiences with Microsoft Office?", instead the assessor could ask "Where do you see learning opportunities for yourself in ICT?"

The Flemish employment service is looking at unemployed people in exactly this way: it is not focusing on past experiences or on the obstacles someone is facing. Instead it looks at what the dreams of the client are and what coaching is necessary for this client. It empowers the client to take the initiative and gives task-related and process-related feedback. The impact on people is that they do not feel neglected, suspicious or resistant. Of course, problems of the client are recognised but the client is in control, guided by a good coach.

A good assessor is a good coach, without being too "helpful". S/he needs to reveal the process, ask questions and organise the information.

Policy context

The Flemish Employment Services are training its coaches the Growth Mindset approach. It has a training programme for coaches "Client aan het stuur". Of course, there is resistance from society. There is no considerable public support for the concept of growth. Politics reflect society. Society and politics want effects on finances. Their discourse is either to give allowances to people who "deserve" it, or to take them away. In that sense it is quite courageous of the Flemish Employment Services to choose Growth Mindset as the underlying principle of all their coaching and assessment procedures.

Impact for assessees

Growth Mindset in general leads to a desire to learn. People applying a Growth Mindset in a certain situation tend to:

- embrace new challenges
- persist in the face of setbacks
- see effort as the path to mastery
- learn from criticism
- find lessons and inspiration in the success of others

The impact on assesseees and assessors is that they have more control of their own situation and their own future. This sense of ownership and desire to learn leads people to higher levels of achievement and a greater sense of free will.

Link: <https://www.mindsetworks.com/default>

Personal comments

Even though it is not a tool in itself, we think it is important to include in the toolbox. It is the precondition for the design of any type of assessment tool that aims to assess and validate the competences of all learners, including those in a vulnerable context. It does not focus on the obstacles and how to overcome the obstacles but on the dreams of the assessee, the areas that work well and that can further be developed.

Interviewee

Kristof Das, team member of the Expertise Center Education for All from UC Leuven-Limburg, is collaborating with the Flemish Employment Counselling Services on the implementation of the Growth Mindset concept into their assessment and coaching practices.

(see also video interview)

