Promote a Growth Mindset to Address Imposter Phenomenon and Stereotype Threat

Imposter phenomenon is the experience of prevalent thoughts and feelings that one does not belong to, and is not capable of succeeding in, their academic or work environment (Schock, 2021). Imposter phenomenon can be more prevalent among people with negative stereotypes associated with one or more of their identities (Washington University in St. Louis, 2016). Stereotype threat is a phenomenon in which a person’s concern about confirming a negative stereotype connected to one or more of their identities leads them to perform below their potential (Steele & Aronson, 1995). For example, people believe that women are not good at math, or that athletes are not scholars. Interventions based on growth mindset research can help to address both imposter phenomenon and stereotype threat, creating positive effects that increase their impact over time, as positive outcomes generate confidence that leads to more positive outcomes (Yeager & Walton, 2011).

Psychologist Carol Dweck’s theory of growth mindset states that people try to overcome a challenge when they feel that they can do so successfully (Dweck, 2016). Underlying the feeling that they do not have the ability to succeed is the belief that their abilities are fixed and cannot be changed. The idea that capabilities are fixed prevents the mind from searching for solutions or seeking help. The good news is that beliefs are not always true, logical, or based on reason and can therefore be overwritten. Dweck’s research found that capabilities, skills, and intelligence evolve throughout our lives and that simply holding the belief that we can learn something or develop our skills enables us to do so. This belief is the growth mindset (Dweck, 2016).

Benefits of a Growth Mindset

Although Dweck’s work has grown in popularity over the past 15 years, there have been criticisms about the initial research and ability to replicate measurable outcomes and practices for large-scale applications (Denworth, 2019). Dweck has acknowledged that her original work has not always been implemented appropriately and has cautioned practitioners to focus not only on the beliefs that a student has about their abilities but also on the fact that they can accomplish challenging tasks by learning and using new strategies and approaches.

Share Carol Dweck’s Research

Students and colleagues can still benefit from knowing that intelligence is not fixed and can grow incrementally through practice and the willingness to learn and try new approaches. Sharing Dweck’s research on growth mindset can enable them to believe in their ability to learn, grow, and use new strategies and approaches to solve problems (Dweck, 2016). This mindset may reduce the impact of stereotype threat by helping people counter the negative stereotype with the belief in their ability to perform, learn, grow, persevere, and succeed.
When communicating with team members and students, you can promote a growth mindset by sending messages that express your confidence in their abilities.

Supplying feedback that helps students and colleagues improve can communicate confidence in their ability to succeed (Darby, 2019). Keep in mind that it is not helpful to lower academic or work expectations or standards because this conversely communicates your belief in the person’s inability to succeed (Meyers et al., 2019).

**Communicate Confidence**

The following feedback practices can help communicate your confidence in a student’s or team member’s progress and growth.

- Focus on the progress that has been made rather than only on what was done incorrectly.
- Avoid overcorrecting. Focus on the primary areas of improvement that are needed rather than identifying everything that was done incorrectly.
- Praise accomplishments privately and, if appropriate, in front of the class or department.
- Allow for praise and credit (when appropriate) for perseverance and continuing through challenges.
- Teach students and team members that seeking deeper understanding, answers, and solutions is part of the process of learning and that initial confusion is not due to a shortcoming on their part. You can do this by repeating when and how you are available to help, promoting the use of your office hours, welcoming questions, and patiently explaining material that you have already addressed (Darby, 2019).

**Embed Growth Mindset Into Practices**

There are several ways to embed Dweck’s growth mindset into your course design and departmental practices. The table below describes ways that you can embed Dweck’s growth mindset into your work with campus members.

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<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Implementation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Teach mistakes as forerunners to success</td>
<td>Include in your course design and departmental materials examples of when mistakes or missteps led to discoveries and innovation in your field (Washington University in St. Louis, 2016). For example, Oprah Winfrey studied communication but was fired</td>
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<td>Allow for continuous feedback and progress</td>
<td>Create low-stakes quizzes, assignments, and tasks that serve as progress markers for students and colleagues to be able to look back at the progress they are making throughout the course or project. This also supplies them with the opportunity to receive regular feedback to help improve skills and content knowledge incrementally (Washington University in St. Louis, 2016).</td>
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<td>Foster a growth mindset environment</td>
<td>Foster an environment that accepts mistakes and views them as learning opportunities. This can be achieved by prompting students and colleagues to reflect through questions such as “Who made an information mistake this week?” (Washington University in St. Louis, 2016). Be sure to model the behavior as well by owning up to any mistakes you may make in class or admitting when you do not know the answer to a question.</td>
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<td>Focus on process over product</td>
<td>Express and show students and colleagues that learning is a process that involves a belief in your ability to learn new things and use new strategies. Team members may think that their peers and instructors are creating amazing work without a lot of time and effort, but showing them drafts or earlier failures and discussing how these challenges help to learn and improve will empower them to focus on the process rather than the product.</td>
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**References**


