

Strategic Use of Mindset and Efficacy Theory

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Achievement theory and goal orientation have wide-ranging implications for almost every field of human endeavor because they speak to the motivation and responses to challenges that every person encounters. From the classroom professor to the operations manager of any company, there is a need to understand the interaction of people's mindsets regarding achievement, and how those may influence the goals they set. The interaction of the mindset, goal, and challenges that occur, then result in responses as varied as walking off the job to responding with redoubled effort. Faced with a challenging assignment, why is it that two equally proficient individuals can have two extremely different responses? One volunteers for the task and seeks out new knowledge and resources to be successful, returning to the drawing board after setbacks and ultimately performs admirably. The other volunteers only grudgingly and in the face of the first setback, quits. Other bemusing behaviors of otherwise competent individuals include surface effort to complete an assignment or outright cheating to make it appear complete. These behaviors are all part of the study of motivation in psychology and can be explained by a number of social-cognitive theories.

In addition to understanding this mechanism of motivation, those in roles of leadership also need concrete practices that will best orient their students/employees/volunteers towards mindsets and goals that enhance effort and perseverance while minimizing the practices that result in individuals giving up. Leaders, whether business or instructional, need to understand the links between achievement motivation, goal setting, and performance. They can then strategically support their associates to achieve despite challenges, and enable them to grow in the process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The social cognitive theorists Carol Dweck and Albert Bandura each provide methods to consider the motivation of people in the face of challenge that provide insights into the interactions that either support or hinder motivation and perseverance. A starting point is Dweck's theory on mindset, since every person has a mindset that impacts how they look at goals and challenge. Dweck's theory is that there are two basic types of mindset. In the first, people believe that they were born with a certain intelligence level and certain talents and those features of themselves are not changeable. The fixed mindset person believes that any weaknesses are evidence of a lack of some form of talent and are to be avoided as they will always be weak areas (Dweck, 2008). The other mindset is termed the growth mindset, sometimes also called the incremental or malleable mindset. As the name implies, the person with the growth mindset believes that their intelligence or talents can be developed over time through effort and study (Dweck, 2008). What is interesting about these mindsets is how they interact with what motivates a person to achieve, the goals a person selects, and their eventual achievement levels on challenging tasks. Dweck's

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research and follow-up research have amassed considerable data that demonstrate some important connections. First, fixed mindset individuals are motivated to be seen in a positive light. Since any failure demonstrates a weakness, they select situations where they will be able to demonstrate the performance of their talents. They will shy away from tasks that they cannot immediately perform proficiently, ideally preferring a task they can perform extraordinarily well to obtain positive feedback on their talent. If something goes awry, the fixed mindset individual is likely to attempt to hide that failure in some manner, potentially including cheating or lying to save their image. These individuals are externally motivated and are very susceptible to negative messages regarding setbacks that they take as personal failure (Cianci, Schaubroeck, & McGill, 2010). The achievement level of the fixed mindset seldom rises fully to its potential. Certainly there have been individuals with tremendous potential (talent) who achieve a certain level, however, once faced with challenges, they subsequently struggle (Dupeyrat & Marine, 2005; Dweck, 2009).

Individuals functioning with a growth mindset, however, recognize that setbacks are inevitable and that effort and perseverance can overcome problems. Endorsing a view that talent or skill can be changed (growth mindset) leads these individuals to set mastery goals in which they seek to learn and grow to a new level. Individuals seeking mastery goals are shown to use more effective strategies and maintain a higher level of effort towards those goals (Dupeyrat & Marine, 2005). These individuals are also intrinsically motivated and as such, are less susceptible to negative messages of setbacks that they anticipate being able to overcome. In fact, a study specifically focused on achievement goals and feedback demonstrated that those with mastery goals are actually motivated by negative feedback, whereas those with performance goals have a decline in performance upon negative feedback (Cianci et al., 2010). The “return to the drawing board” mentality keeps growth mindset individuals focused on their goal and permits them to utilize constructive criticism to move forward towards their goal.

Also of interest in discussing motivation is a theory put forth by Albert Bandura that describes the interaction of what one believes they can do, how hard they try to do it, and what happens when we think others are doing it better. Even within a general growth mindset there are going to be moments of doubt and Bandura’s Self-Efficacy Theory provides some illumination of the mechanism that supports perseverance in the face of challenge. Self-efficacy is the self-held belief that one can be successful on a task. Self-Efficacy Theory states that the beliefs about one’s capabilities have influences upon one’s feelings, thoughts, motivation, and behavior. Since purposeful behavior typically includes a goal, the selection of goals is a major part of behavior. In order to select a goal, one must self-assess the likelihood of success which leads to one’s self-efficacy – the belief that one can accomplish a goal. Studies have demonstrated that individuals who believe strongly in themselves are quicker to select effective strategies and discard ineffective ones than equally skilled individuals who hold less of an expectation of success. Another facet of self-efficacy shows up when individuals perceive their peers performing better than themselves. Bandura demonstrated that this negative social comparison causes a decline in self-efficacy and results in erratic analytic thinking (Bandura, 1993).

With Self-Efficacy Theory being linked to selecting goals, it also turns out that there are links between self-efficacy and the type of goal selected, and the performance necessary to achieve the goal. Bandura has shown that encountering negative feedback during performance of a simulated management activity resulted in erratic analytical thinking and an overall decline in performance for those who were told the simulation measured their innate talents, but not for those who were told it measured a skill they could improve (Bandura, 1993). This means that an individual with a growth mindset who selects a mastery goal will be more able to maintain their self-efficacy and motivation towards that goal in the face of negative feedback. An individual, however, with a fixed mindset who has selected a performance goal

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