

The Traps of a Fixed Mindset

Three Questions:

What are the “signs” in your life that you are struggling with stress or anxiety?

We all have both fixed and growth mindsets. What are your “fixed mindset traps?” What triggers fixed mindset thinking?

What step can you take this week to help you take small steps of shifting from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset?

After our meeting in Denver, Jeff picked up his daughter, Sarah, from school. They usually discuss the things that she learned in school that day, especially as she is transitioning to Middle School. She turned the tables on him, “What did you learn at your meeting dad?” Jeff began explaining about mindsets. She replied, “That’s it? We learned about Fixed and Growth Mindsets in the 5th grade!”

As we all know, there is a huge difference between knowing and practicing. Many of us will admit that we need to eat healthier, pray more, or exercise more. The challenge isn’t in knowing, it is in doing.

Fixed Mindset Traps

What are some of the traps, or negative scripts that will pull us back into a fixed mindset.

Fear of a Diminished

Reputation: Perhaps you are seen as one who has few if any deficiencies. You are a natural leader, a gifted preacher, or a talented worship leader. When facing



“Look at the world around you. It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push—in just the right place—it can be tipped.” Malcom Gladwell

new challenges, sometimes we are afraid that we will be seen differently by people who respect and admire us. This is a subtle and often unconscious trap. (Dweck, 2006, pp. 42–43)

Beliefs about Other People: Dweck’s team also explored the impact of mindset on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She found that that groups have fixed traits, not just individuals. This “group” mindset perpetuated fears, anger, and hostility. (Dweck, 2012, p. 615) Can pastors develop a fixed

mindset about the ability or willingness of their church to face challenges? Can they perceive certain groups within the church as always resistive or always negative?

Fear of Taking Risks: Pastors speak more clearly about a sense of call or mission than other professions. The very nature of pastoral ministry is idealistic. (Doolittle, 2007, p. 35) Yet many pastors minister in contexts in which they are afraid of taking risks. They find themselves being sabotaged either

internally or by the leadership of the church. They become a “highly anxious risk-avoider.” (Friedman, 2007, pp. 13–14) Rather than pursuing the ideal, they settle for the safe, with great personal harm. They are left with a lifetime of regrets. (Dweck, 2006, p. 44)

Negative Scripts: Many of us carry negative scripts from our childhood (or early ministry). Unlike Sarah, we were not taught about mindsets in 5th grade. We were taught that when we tried and failed, we should quit or give up. We were taught that if we didn’t do well in a class, we should drop the class. If we got a bad grade, we felt stupid. When we face anxiety and stress we fall into the trap of these negative messages.

Overcoming Our Fixed Mindsets

Take Small Steps: In responding to the Palestinian and Israeli fixed mindset, Dweck’s team did not try to solve the whole problem. They began with small steps. They invited individuals to meet and listen to their point of view. (Dweck, 2012, p. 616) They built relationships.

Seeing Others as Malleable: What if we could believe that the “other side” could change and think in different ways? (Dweck, 2012, p. 616) If we tend to see our churches as “a stiff-necked people” (Exod. 32:9, Acts 7:51), what if we intentionally read stories of transformation? What if we explore our church’s history for times when they faced challenges?

Redefine the Meaning of Effort: The fixed mindset says that if we have to try hard, we should go back to doing what comes more naturally. The growth mindset says that no effort is too much for a worthy goal. We can accept that it is hard and worth every bit of the work. Can we convince ourselves that the mission of the church is worth the effort?

Work with the Right People: Malcom Gladwell argues that the difference between effective change and “failure” is often smaller than we think. He states that working with people of influence is often the difference. Big Bird was the difference between success and failure of *Sesame Street*. *Sesame Street* became a success when they had adults interact with Big Bird and repeated simple themes. (Gladwell, 2002, pp. 131–132, 259) Luke

10:1-12 encourages the 72 to find a “person of peace” in the village or move on.

Becoming a Well-Differentiated Leader: The concept of differentiation comes from Bowen Family Systems. Friedman argues that in the midst of the process of change, leaders need to have clarity about his or her own goals, ability to separate AND remain connected to anxious people and groups, and someone who can manage his or her own reactivity in relationship to the reactivity of others. (Friedman, 2007, p. 14) When pastors encourage churches to face their challenges, some in the congregation will react with high anxiety and pursue any quick fix. The well differentiated leader is able to work within this context without being pulled into its anxiety. (Steinke, 2006, pp. 8–9)

Conclusion

We know that this will not be easy. We know that it takes continuous effort to change our own way of thinking about problems. We know that when we are under stress or engaged in conflict (congregational or family), we tend towards negative behaviors such as unhealthy eating, procrastination, and failure to focus on goals. (Dweck, 2012, p. 620) Having an outside group where we can be transparent about our thinking and our struggles can empower us to continue to focus on incremental changes that will help us continue moving forward.

Journaling Assignment:

How can you work with your pastor in the area of facing fixed mindset way of thinking? What steps can she or he take to begin developing a growth mindset?