

Setting the bar: Fostering success mindsets in first-year business students

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an exploration of success mindsets and one example of how these may be used as an intervention to impact student success in both their personal and professional lives. Gottfredson's Success Mindsets concept is used as the intervention. These success mindsets combine four sets of mindsets associated with positive outcomes: fixed/growth, closed/open, prevention/promotion, and inward/outward mindsets, and are identified as key factors in unlocking greater success in life, work, and leadership. Previous research supports individuals' ability to change their mindset through conscious effort and specific interventions.

This classroom intervention introduced success mindsets to first-year business students and consisted of one learning module that included pre-course activities and a class discussion. The implementation focused on creating a culture that supports growth mindsets, encourages self-reflection, promotes innovative thinking, and de-emphasizes grades as the sole measure of success. The class discussion covered students' reactions to the learning material and highlighted the positive impact on student engagement, interaction, and retention. With a small intervention on success mindsets, it may be possible to empower students to develop these success mindsets and foster enhanced growth and achievement.

Keywords: Success Mindsets, Pedagogy, First-Year Students, College of Business

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INTRODUCTION

A common goal all faculty can agree on and strive to attain is success for their students. To accomplish this, we provide the foundational knowledge needed in their careers. What if we could add a short learning management system (LMS) assignment with a corresponding discussion on the first day of class that may have the potential to enhance their thinking, learning, and behavior for greater success in their personal as well as professional lives? This may be accomplished by including a short learning module and a corresponding discussion on success mindsets.

“Mindsets are individuals’ mental lenses that selectively organize and encode information, thereby orienting them toward a unique way of understanding their experiences and guiding them toward corresponding actions and responses,” (Gottfredson & Reina, 2021, p. 439). Mindsets are comprised of neural networks located in the prefrontal cortex for associative memory processing. Thus, mindsets for the most part operate unconsciously to assist in quickly processing information. As such, mindsets drive actions and impact thinking, learning, and behavior, affecting the level of success (Gottfredson, 2020).

Mindsets can be changed (Crum et al., 2013; Heslin & Keating, 2017). Through self-awareness of current mindsets and determination to improve, students can replace less-effective mindsets through conscious thought and specific interventions to build positive neural connections (Gottfredson, 2020). This paper provides a brief literature review and details a short activity introducing success mindsets to a first-year class of business students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on mindsets has flourished since Peter Gollwitzer’s study of cognition (1990, 2012). Carol Dweck’s work on growth mindset (1999; 2007; 2008; 2010; 2016) is joined by a plethora of varying mindset research including--but not limited to--global mindset (French & Chang, 2016; Rhinesmith, 1992), benefit mindset (Buchanan & Kern, 2017), abundance mindset (Hope, 2022; Mehta & Zhu, 2012), deliberative mindset (Reeve, 2018), learning goal mindset (Vandewalle et al., 2019), productive mindset (Argyris, 2004), entrepreneurial mindset (Kriewall, 2010; Daniel, 2016; Colombelli, et al, 2022), and leadership mindset (Crane, 2021; Gottfredson & Reina, 2021).

After extensive research of the current literature on mindsets, Gottfredson (2020) combined four independent sets of mindsets that exhibited decades of positive research outcomes. These mindsets are fixed/growth mindsets, closed/open mindsets, prevention/promotion mindsets, and inward/outward mindsets. Together, these mindsets present a focused way of thinking, learning, and behaving for greater success in life, work, and leadership. Gottfredson’s Success Mindsets Assessment is freely available. Aptly alluded to by the title, each set of mindsets operates on a continuum from negative to positive. Gottfredson (2020) labels the positive mindsets “Success Mindsets,” as prior research supports these as essential for greater success in life, both personally and professionally.

Since mindsets can be changed through conscious effort, the Success Mindsets Assessment provides a foundation for personal development. The personalized report provides the assessment results and explains the mindsets in detail with specific ways to strengthen how a person thinks and acts for a more enriched life. Following is a brief overview of the fixed/growth mindsets, closed/open mindsets, prevention/promotion mindsets, and inward/outward mindsets.

Fixed vs. Growth Mindset

The growth mindset is founded on the belief that one is able to change one's talents, abilities, and intelligence. This mindset is grounded in four key elements, including 1) a focus on learning and growing, 2) persistence beyond failure, 3) an appreciation of feedback, and 4) the belief that effort is required for success. On the other hand, the fixed mindset emphasizes avoiding challenges in order to look good because success should come naturally (Gottfredson, 2020). Individuals with a growth mindset tend to accomplish more than individuals with a fixed mindset due to their commitment to learning (Dweck, 2013).

The difference between these two mindsets is showcased by Gottfredson (2020) in the comparison of American football players, Johnny Manziel and Tom Brady. Both athletes were drafted into the NFL but had very different careers due to their mindsets. Johnny had a fixed mindset that led to a two-year NFL career. Tom played for 23 seasons and is arguably one of the league's most successful quarterbacks, partially due to his growth mindset. Tom viewed his selection in the 6th round of the draft as an opportunity to excel and grow.

A growth mindset can lead to individual success at work and more generally in a person's everyday life. Gottfredson (2020) stresses that this growth mindset can be learned through personal exploration and development. Students can be guided through this process by educators through a four-step process to instill a growth mindset. Step one focuses on creating a culture that does not make every failure punitive and instead views failures as opportunities to grow. The next step emphasizes a culture that encourages students to take ownership of their failures through self-reflection activities. Step three places greater weight on assignments that utilize innovative thinking and problem-solving, rather than memorization. The final step de-emphasizes the role of grades in student learning.

Through the creation of a culture that supports a growth mindset, educators can empower their students. These students are likely to see increases in their motivation to learn, as well as their accomplishments. It takes time and effort to assist students with the development of a growth mindset; however, the notable benefits outweigh the costs (Heggart, 2015).

Closed vs. Open Mindset

Individuals with an open mindset seek all perspectives and ideas in order to uncover the best conclusion that serves everyone involved (Gottfredson, 2020). The goal of an open mindset is to be committed to pursuing the truth through continuous curiosity, seeking to understand, and challenging the stories individuals tell themselves. Conscious leaders are committed to exploring the opposite of their stories (Dethmer et al., 2015), while individuals with a closed mindset seek to be right, seen, defend, protect their ego, and reject any notions that they are wrong (Gottfredson, 2020).

Embracing an open mindset leads to greater success in life, relationships, and work. Google revealed that psychological safety was the most important factor that drives the best teams to optimal performance (Gottfredson, 2020). Psychological safety is defined as an environment created to foster a feeling of safety to speak candidly and make mistakes without retaliation (Schein & Bennis, 1965). A prerequisite of psychological safety is an open mindset. Bridgewater and Associates, one of the most successful hedge funds of all time, practices radical open-mindedness (Dalio, 2017). The open mindset cultivates innovation, which companies use to stay relevant, grow, and differentiate themselves from competitors (Ringel et al., 2015).

Individuals become more successful through intentional steps to develop an open mindset and awareness. Unconsciously, many individuals are not as open-minded as they hope. To foster awareness, individuals must acknowledge fear, which supports a closed mindset, that drives many goals and mindsets. Similarly, eliciting feedback from others increases one's awareness. Intentional steps to develop an open mindset include meditating and changing individual stories, which reinforces that the brain is neuroplastic (Gottfredson, 2020).

Through positive reframing, which challenges the stories people tell themselves, people let go of the notion of right or wrong (Haidt, 2006). Byron Katie (2017) utilizes another technique to challenge stories we tell ourselves, called *The Work*. *The Work* prompts people to challenge self-talk through answering four questions: 1) Is it true? 2) Can you absolutely know that it is true? 3) How do you react, what happens, when you believe that thought? 4) Who would you be without that thought? These questions help individuals remain open to all options. An open mindset, which explores all possibilities to develop the best solution, primes the mind to what Gottfredson calls a promotion mindset.

Prevention vs. Promotion Mindset

An individual visualizes the attainment of goals through the lens of a prevention versus promotion mindset (Gottfredson, 2020; Gottfredson and Reina, 2021). Individuals with a prevention mindset approach their goals with a primary objective of risk reduction; they do so by adopting strategies to avoid problems by taking the easier path. Individuals with a promotion mindset approach their goal with one clear focus of winning. This strategy leads individuals to embrace problems, learn from difficulties, and move forward even if it seems like a challenging path. A promotion mindset helps leaders to be more cognizant of factors that lead to positive effects, growth, and accomplishment (Gottfredson and Reina, 2021; Johnson et al, 2015; Kark and Van Dijk, 2007).

Gottfredson (2020) highlights some key aspects that individuals with a promotion mindset tend to embody: (1) operating with a clear goal in mind and accepting that challenges will present themselves, (2) the ability to put off comfort and have the willingness to take on challenges, and (3) a focus on what can go right when choosing an option (instead of dwelling on what can go wrong). Gottfredson (2020) also notes that fear is an important determinant that differentiates individuals with prevention from promotion mindset: fear of failure drives people with prevention mindsets and does not hinder those with a promotion mindset.

Extant research has investigated the consequences of adopting a promotion mindset and the research provides a variety of insights. A meta-analysis by Lanaj et al. (2012) reveals that individuals with a promotion mindset develop goals that are more challenging, and they pursue these goals with a higher level of persistent effort. Gottfredson (2020) highlights daily practices such as journaling, connecting the dots between long-term goals and daily steps, and meditation as important steps in developing a promotion mindset.

Christenson (2013) elaborates extensively on the importance of identifying a purpose and setting a goal to realize the purpose. Research supports the fact that instead of being driven by forces, having a promotion mindset puts an individual in the driver's seat to determine the course of life. For students, the insight about identifying and clearly visualizing a goal is critical to developing a promotion mindset.

Inward vs. Outward Mindset

The outward mindset is based on decades of research and consultancy by The Arbinger Institute (2016). Using an inward or outward mindset influences how people interact and how they are viewed by others in those interactions. Those with an inward mindset view others as finishers of tasks and/or as resources needed to complete specific goals. Those with an outward mindset view others as individuals with wants, needs, and feelings.

To determine whether one has an outward mindset toward others, Gottfredson, (2020) suggests asking ourselves these questions:

- :Am I seeing them as a person or as an object?
- Do I think, in general, that each person is doing the best they can?
- Why do I think this is (or is not) the case? (p. 211)

People with an inward mindset take credit for their successes and blame others for their failures. They block themselves from growth opportunities. With an outward mindset, people see themselves more accurately. They are more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, which enable them to grow, learn, and develop.

Gottfredson (2020) challenges everyone to develop an outward mindset through a simple four-step process which includes 1) identifying the types of current mindset, 2) recognizing the cause of the mindset, 3) assessing mindset through asking key questions to help rewire the brain, and 4) managing self-care as it is easier to turn toward an inward mindset when stressed (p. 228).

Introducing these success mindsets to first-year students may enable them to: (1) more properly determine mindsets that impede greater personal success and (2) more fully take charge in the direction of their lives (Gottfredson, 2020).

CLASSROOM IMPLEMENTATION

Students in an Introduction to Business and Ethics course served as the target for this activity. This course consisted of first-year college students, most of whom were attending their first-ever college course. This course was chosen because of the impact a success mindset activity could have on students in their first college course experience. Additionally, since all students in a business degree program need to take this course as an entry to their major, this activity impacted over 600 undergraduate students across eight sections.

Leading up to the start of the semester, the instructor of each section of the course sent a welcome e-mail to students via the LMS. This introductory e-mail was sent one week prior to the first meeting date. It outlined the basics of the course and requested that students complete a “Discover Your Success Mindsets” activity prior to the first class. The activities were prominently featured at the top of the first learning module in the LMS.

In the module, students were first presented with an explanation of the importance of mindsets relative to their future success and were reminded that mindsets can be improved with self-awareness. Students then viewed a four-minute TED Talk by Dr. Alia Crum, who outlined the importance of a success mindset and discussed academic studies that illustrated how important a growth mindset is in achieving success in life. The four success mindsets—growth, open, promotion, and outward—were shared with the students via a Ryan Gottfredson blog. Finally, students were directed to the 25-question mindset assessment survey and were told to bring the results of the survey to the first class.

In opening sessions with class sections of 130 first-year students, professors begin with the establishment of culture, developmental habits, and accountability for the immediate semester, and potentially for the entire college experience. Mindset, principles, habits, and competencies are used as scaffolding around the educational learning outcomes associated with business and ethical reasoning. Consistent with Gottfredson's (2020) four-process model for instilling a growth mindset, the following example discussion points are stressed prior to the conversation pertaining to the Success Mindset self-assessment results:

- The classroom culture is a safe place to gain knowledge and wisdom through practical application, and transferable skills. Values of dignity, respect, and appreciation for differences are highlighted prior to assessment discussions.
- The process of college in general, and each individual course, is a talent development process preparing people for utilizing their potential. Self-discovery through assessment and class reflection on the information as well as renewal planning are stages of the developmental cycle.
- Mindsets can foster the ability to see and realize self-potential and the potential of others.
- Stories are commonly used to engage students in their own development. For example, Covey (2022, p. 1) provides an analogy between Death Valley National Park and its lack of vegetation appearing as a desolate desert. However, with rain, the desert will come to life with brilliant wildflowers, and it flourishes. Then the question to students becomes, what is dormant in you that if placed in the right environment would flourish? The professor quickly gains input and discussion on what is needed to foster learning, growth, belonging, and success.
- Self-awareness through assessment of mindset unlocks ownership of proactive choice (Covey, 1989, 2004; Hyter, 2021). Students understand that they can choose to alter their mindset after viewing the Success Mindset Assessment results.
- Gottfredson (2020) shares that the choice of descriptive language shows the power of choice applied to mindset. Dweck (2008) encourages ending sentences related to skills learners might not currently possess with the simple word "yet." In classroom discussions, the impact of this suggestion is profound for some students.
- The offering of "yet" to the discussion implies possibility exists and is not fixed. Magness (2022) shares that a person's level of control changes how they respond to stress, and when they increase their sense of control, their internal alarm is quieter.

Setting the context for the discussion surrounding Success Mindsets appears to reduce student anxiety, clarify the why behind considering building a success mindset, and launch a personal journey towards reflecting on one's own assessment results. Additionally, professors establish a linkage between the role of a success mindset to the major course learning outcomes (ethical reasoning, business literacy, high-performance teaming, creativity and innovative thinking, international business, and accountability) and specific course modules (Ethics and Social Responsibility, Financials and Economics, Human Capital, Marketing, Entrepreneurship, and Business Strategy). The emphasis is placed on creating a pull for relevant learning through applied practice versus the risk or reward of a given course grade. The discussion format occurs in the following order:

- Review the Success Mindset Assessment – Professors extract from the instrument that success in life, work, and leadership depends on personal thinking, learning and behavior that come from our mindsets (Gottfredson, 2022).

- Cover the Success Mindsets – Professors mention the range of positive to negative on the assessment continuum and comment on how the instrument helps learners identify opportunities for greater mindset success.
- Review Faculty Results – Professors show their own personal assessment results, interpret their data while explaining the instrument, openly share their personal reflections, and discuss potential improvement opportunities while asking for feedback. This requires being vulnerable. Brown (2018) states that in teams and organizations where heart and emotion, especially vulnerability, are seen as liabilities, the culture declines or individual leaders guard their ego, lock up their heart, and seal off feelings. Culture building through professor role model behavior aids in fostering a developmental environment in the classroom.
- Review Student Results – Students are asked to review their results prior to class. In class, students are asked to pair and share with one other class member. Professors stress that sharing can include as little or much as students feel comfortable explaining to a new classmate. The focus is placed on where there were positive strengths and developmental opportunities. Peer pairings are asked to take turns speaking, listening, and providing feedback.
- Facilitate Classroom Discussion – The professor facilitates a large group discussion on the major themes experienced across the class as a population, seeking ideas for collective opportunities to improve an overall success mindset.

STUDENT REACTION TO THE LEARNING MODULE

Gottfredson's Success Mindset Assessment and the Personal Mindset Assessment results, administered early in a large section course, act as an icebreaker enabling a semester-long conversation around the power of mindsets, principles, habits, and skills. Student engagement in assessment completion, classroom discussions, and associated assignments creates a positive collective learning experience. The activity may enhance student onboarding to college, interaction with fellow classmates, retention, and success. A sampling of student reactions to the Success Mindset assessment includes:

- Assessment can be developmental and not punitive. Students realize that the exercise is not about getting a grade or finding faults; instead, it centers on building a new habit of openness toward becoming more self-aware and self-managing. In conversations with peers regarding personal results, they appreciate the social interaction and safe feedback. Students expressed that there is a progressive development opportunity given the negative to the positive continuum of each success mindset.
- Fixed vs. Growth Mindset. Student reactions to this mindset were considerably different depending on the person's current perspective. The realization that effort engages potential and that one's limit is not fixed is inspiring. A fundamental shift in mindset can make a difference.
- Inward vs. Outward Mindset. Students reacted primarily to the idea of seeing people as objects to get things accomplished versus seeing people with lives, ambitions, and dreams. They offered stories of their own experiences in jobs where they felt like objects, or where they had managers or customers who valued them as a person. Students shared openly how important relational respect is to them. Open conversation provides professors with the opportunity to discuss the social norms desired in the classroom.

- Closed vs. Open Mindset. Pairing and sharing with other students highlights the value of interaction and feedback. Students shared how coaches, teachers, parents, and other students had assisted with their development. They commented that they expect and value feedback for their development.
- Prevention vs. Promotion. Students reacted with purpose-driven responses claiming they are goal-oriented for the betterment of the environment, social matters, businesses, others, and themselves. They expressed wanting fulfillment from meaningful work, lifelong learning, and an accepting work culture.

Professors strive to advance students' cognitive understanding of critical business and ethical reasoning content along with skill development transferable to "best in class" industry practices. This success mindsets activity is one way to start the conversation.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores the four success mindsets described in Gottfredson's Success Mindsets book and one intervention used in the classroom to improve student success from the residence hall to the workplace. These include growth, open, promotion, and outward mindsets. Each mindset can fundamentally unleash greater success in all areas of life.

This classroom intervention used to engage first-year business students includes a learning module with pre-course activities and a classroom discussion. For successful implementation, faculty must create a supportive culture that fosters self-reflection along with creative thinking and de-emphasizes grades as a measure of success. Students discussed increased self-awareness and the ability to embrace challenging circumstances. This small intervention may encourage students to develop these success mindsets and empower them for enhanced growth and achievement.

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