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Don't worry, it's all in your head?



Watty Piper, The Little Engine that Could



Anyone who grew up with *"The Little Engine that Could"* won't be surprised to read about the powerful impact that beliefs have on performance. The little engine ("I think I can, I think I can") already knew what researchers are increasingly concluding: what's in our heads directly affects how we perform. Which is both good news and bad news.



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The good

Stanford's Carol Dweck and Jo Boaler, examining student performance, have shown over the years that how we think about our talents and abilities, in particular whether we believe intelligence or talent is fixed (the now-famous growth versus fixed mindset distinction), significantly affects our potential and is in fact a strong predictor of real-world achievement.

In the fields of sports medicine and psychology, researchers are also making surprising discoveries of how beliefs can improve athletic performance. Get a group of competitive cyclists to believe they've just taken a dose of caffeine (when in fact they haven't), and you get an increase in time-trial performance, with "higher dose" cyclists improving more than "lower dose" ones. Suffering from shortness of breath and headaches at high altitudes? Breathing from a fake oxygen tank gets the body to react as if it were actually receiving oxygen: with reduced heart rate, breathing rate and slowed expansion of blood vessels.

While these surprising results raise the question of whether placebos will at some point be considered banned substances in competitive sports, Anand Jagatia puts forward a very interesting conclusion: these studies "prove that we have the ability to do better — we just have to believe it."

Anders Ericsson would likely agree. Through extensive research on peak performance and deliberate practice (later popularized by Malcolm Gladwell in *Outliers*), Ericsson shows that, thanks to the brain's tremendous adaptability, "there's no such thing as predefined ability": even for abilities as "innate" as perfect pitch (it can, in fact, be learned; you just need to start fairly young).

For Ericsson,

it no longer makes sense to think of people as born with fixed reserves of potential; instead, potential is an expandable vessel...We can create our own potential.

A fixed mindset, he might say, just gets it wrong.

The good news, then, is that our beliefs can positively affect our performance, even our health. The great thing about it all being in our heads is that learning is more about "creating abilities", as Ericsson notes, "rather than...taking advantage of innate ones."

In a study cited by Boaler, simply believing that one's work satisfied medical recommendations for an active lifestyle, led to lower blood-pressure, body-fat and body-mass-index

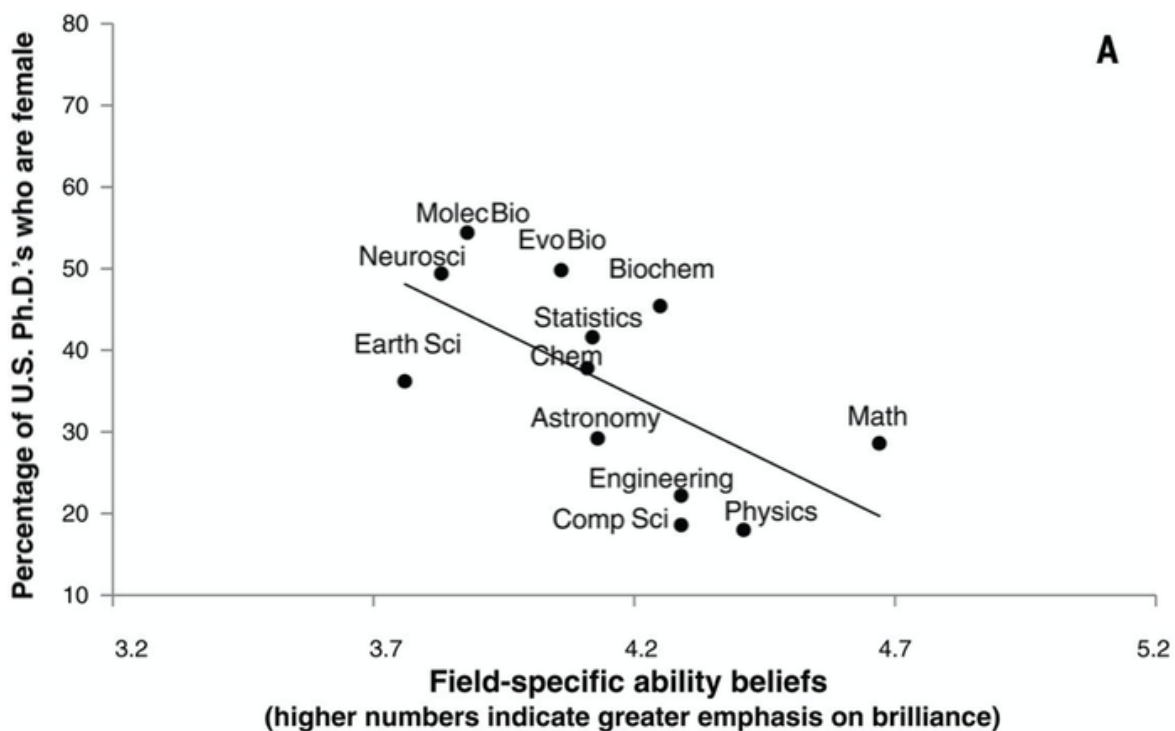
But now the bad news: what's in other people's heads also affects our performance.

The bad

We know from Rosenthal and Jacobson's work in the 1960's that teachers' beliefs about students' intelligence measurably affect student IQ gains. (The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's Moishe tries to twist this into fatherly advice when he tells his 13-year-old son, "It's very important that you show people you're bigger and better than them, because if they think it, then you'll be it. That's how you get ahead in the world.").

In a more recent study, "Expectations of brilliance underlie gender distributions across academic disciplines," Sarah-Jane Leslie from Princeton and her co-authors paint an equally disconcerting picture. They sought to understand the extent to which university professors believe that success in their academic field depends upon raw talent, that is, on some form of innate ability.

These beliefs, as we know, are the hallmarks of fixed mindsets. The findings are remarkable.



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Controlling for a number of alternative hypotheses, the authors' conclusion is clear:

...the extent to which practitioners of a discipline believe [emphasis added] that success depends on sheer brilliance is a strong predictor of women's and African Americans' representation in that discipline.

Stop and read that again. Simply put, **greater prevalence of fixed mindsets means lower levels of participation among women and African Americans.**

But what does this mean in the context of organizations?

While the notions of fixed and growth mindsets have been widely embraced within at least the human resources communities of organizations, there is, I propose, a critical question on whether certain HR practices unwittingly reinforce fixed mindsets, with possibly the same set of consequences evidenced by Boaler, Dweck, Leslie and others.

Take the traditional nine-box talent review. This process obviously puts people in categories, with various creative labels for each box. But at the end of the exercise, do the HR and business leaders come away thinking that everyone can develop, that the people distributed across the grids are at different places in their learning and development journeys, or that those in the magical top right corner have instead that "something special", that secret leadership sauce...that they have, dare we say, an innate ability ?

When an organization conducts a leadership or "potential" assessment (with attendant psychometric and cognitive measures) what message is heard by the participants, their managers, HR, and importantly, what beliefs get reinforced? Is it the belief that the person has yet to learn and develop — that potential is indeed an expandable vessel — or that he or she just doesn't possess the right qualities?

In academic and school settings, research has demonstrated the self-fulfilling nature of labels. In studying thousands of students, Boaler has shown the counter-productive effects on student achievement of tracking practices ("placing students in groups based on their supposed ability and then teaching students within those groups"), and that these effects are replicated even when teachers are simply told which tracks students are in as "they treat students differently whether they intend to or not."

The parallels between schools and organizations are quite tempting. It seems, at times, that we've simply implemented in our organizations the practices we grew up with in school, all the way to the end-of-year performance evaluation (more on this in a moment). Admittedly, such replication isn't always bad: whenever I think of leadership development learning expeditions, it always evokes fond memories of elementary school field trips.

The compelling question remains whether some HR practices may unintentionally reinforce fixed mindsets about success in different organizational functions and roles. Because if they do, it's possible they have the same negative effects not only on achievement, but also on the level of representation of women and minorities.

...and how to make it less ugly

A very first step would be to understand the prevalence of fixed mindsets within managerial populations. Leveraging engagement survey platforms and building on the [protocol](#) from the Science study, it should be possible to gain helpful insights and set a baseline on where we are today, testing a similar set of hypotheses explored by the authors of "Expectations of brilliance".

But there are more immediate steps one can take. The Science study offers some practical advice, at least for academics: those "who wish to diversify their fields might want to downplay talk of innate intellectual giftedness and instead highlight the importance of sustained effort for top-level success in their field." Focusing on effort over innate ability is key.

Jo Boaler, instead, shows us the power of **four magic words**.

Describing a study of students in high-school English classes, she writes:

*All of the students received critical, diagnostic feedback...from their teachers, but half of the students received an extra sentence at the end of the feedback...The students who received the extra sentence — especially students of color — achieved at significantly higher levels in school a year later, with higher GPAs (grade point averages)...It simply said: "I am giving you this feedback because **I believe in you.**"*

Now, much has been written on the shortcomings of performance management in organizations (known to decimate motivation and reduce grown men and women to tears), but I sense it's outdated end-of-year rating format (much like in school) is still widespread. Imagine, though, being able to improve performance without the aid of sophisticated apps, HR IT systems, forms or processes, but by simply saying, "I believe in you"?

The trick, of course, isn't just pronouncing the words, but genuinely believing them: believing that ability is not innate, and believing in others' limitless potential.

For better or worse, it's all in your head.

Marcel Lieberman



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