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One barrier to diversity in tech is a culture of genius

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It's no secret that the tech industry **struggles with diversity**. While there are a number of factors limiting progress (things like explicit and unconscious bias, flawed processes and systems and homogeneous cultures), one that's often overlooked is the industry's fixed

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mindset — its belief that intelligence, talents and abilities are fixed traits.
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This mindset manifests as a culture that views brilliance as critical to success, and where some people are seen as inherently more brilliant than others — a “[culture of genius](#).”

It shows up in companies’ job descriptions seeking “rockstars.” It comes into play in hiring conversations, where interviewers debate whether candidates have sufficient “cognitive

ability” or “a brain for engineering.” It emerges in feedback conversations, when employees are praised for brilliance and intellectual horsepower. And it’s reflected in how the industry treats its leaders, elevating them to star status.

Many [leaders in tech](#) purport to embrace a “growth mindset” — a belief in people’s ability to grow and develop. And in some respects, the industry does encourage such a mindset. For example, “failure” in tech is often seen as [productive](#). But the industry’s culture of genius suggests a fixed mindset is driving views about intelligence, talents and abilities.

There are important consequences to such a mindset. When people have a fixed mindset, they focus more on proving themselves than improving, they view struggle as a sign of inadequacy and they give up in the face of setbacks. Like individuals, organizations and even entire fields have mindsets, and those with a growth mindset set loftier goals, take smarter risks and remain resilient in the face of setbacks.

But in organizations and fields, a fixed mindset has another important consequence — it limits efforts to become more diverse and inclusive. Here’s how a fixed mindset impedes diversity and inclusion efforts:

A fixed mindset leads to more stereotyping. Research shows that individuals with a fixed mindset are more likely to rely on stereotypes. This makes sense, because “stereotypes” are essentially beliefs about groups’ fixed traits. In a [recent neuroscience study](#), participants with a fixed mindset were more surprised than those with a growth mindset when they observed a person behaving in a stereotype-inconsistent way (e.g. when they saw a math geek reading the arts section of a newspaper), compared to when

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they saw that person behaving stereotypically (e.g. that same person reading the science section). Because a growth mindset rejects the idea of fixed abilities, it makes stereotypes less relevant.

Fixed mindset companies attract a less diverse applicant pool. It turns out that job candidates implicitly recognize this connection between a fixed mindset and stereotyping. When a company communicates a fixed mindset, it sends a powerful message to members of stereotyped groups that the organization may view them through the lens of stereotypes. This message can deter candidates from stereotyped groups from applying to jobs altogether, and make them more likely to leave.

In [one study](#), researchers showed men and women career websites for a hypothetical management consulting company. When the site portrayed a fixed mindset (saying they wanted to hire employees “who have the intelligence and abilities that we’re looking for”), women trusted the company less than when it portrayed a growth mindset (focusing on how they want to help employees “learn, discover, and grow”).

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Fixed-mindset managers are less likely to notice employee growth. When managers have a fixed mindset, they’re less likely to notice when employee performance improves or declines. In [one study](#), participants observed an employee performing poorly, and they were asked to rate that performance. Participants with a fixed mindset and a growth mindset both rated the employee’s performance equally low. But when they later observed that same employee performing well, fixed mindset participants rated the employee lower relative to their true performance, while growth mindset participants accurately observed the employee’s improvement.

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A reliance on stereotypes, combined with a decreased likelihood of updating one's opinion in the face of new evidence, can create an environment where employees, and particularly those from stereotyped groups, are unfairly and inaccurately evaluated.

What's the alternative?

Companies that want to create an environment where everyone does their best work should focus on employee growth and development: recognize that people can improve, that mistakes are chances to learn and that setbacks are key to success.

By shifting away from a focus on genius, and instead emphasizing employee growth and development, companies will not only become more effective when it comes to goal-setting, risk-taking and resilience, but they'll create more inclusive cultures where people from all backgrounds can thrive.

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