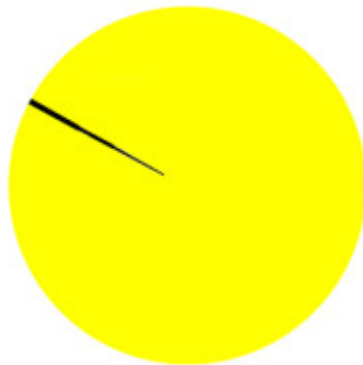
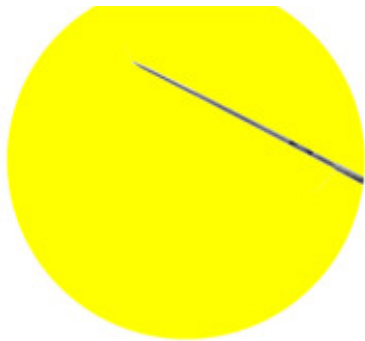


RECEIVING FEEDBACK

How Age and Gender Affect Self-Improvement

by Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman

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HBR STAFF

Why do some people react so defensively to critical feedback, while others take it on the chin?

To help us answer this question, over the last year we've gathered data on how people react to feedback. We called the defensive tendency "proving" (as in, having something to prove) and the accepting tendency "improving" (as in, being willing to admit improvement was needed). These definitions are close to, though not exactly the same as, the "fixed" and "growth" mindsets discovered by Stanford professor Carol Dweck.

People with a growth mindset tend to focus on improving, learning, and effort; while folks with a fixed mindset assume that our abilities are based more on inborn talents and traits and unlikely to change. The former seek out challenging situations and welcome feedback, including criticism. The latter strive to prove themselves to others, using their existing skills. They tend to avoid feedback and criticism, and usually select tasks at which they can look good and succeed.

We examined roughly 7,000 self-assessments, and focused on a group of questions that measured a "proving" versus "improving" orientation. For instance, we asked people what happened the last time they were given negative feedback - did they challenge it, or listen openly? Did they take it personally or not? When a close friend gave them corrective feedback, did they question its validity, or accept that it was probably true? How did they think their coworkers would describe them - as resistant to corrective feedback, or open to it?

We designed the assessment as a self-assessment for personal development, in an effort to minimize the motivation to "look good to others" that is usually found in a proving mentality. We found that 8.3% of respondents had a strong "proving" orientation, 8.4% were divided in their orientation, and 83% had an "improving" orientation.

The results may have been somewhat lopsided; after all, respondents were by definition people interested in their personal development. Therefore it's not surprising that the majority had an "improving" orientation. And of course, this was a *self*-assessment – let's

face it, most of us like to think that we respond graciously and objectively to all kinds of feedback. (For reference, in Dweck's original research with young children, she found that 40% had a fixed mindset, 40% had a growth mindset, and 20% were undecided.)

YOU AND YOUR TEAM

Improving Yourself

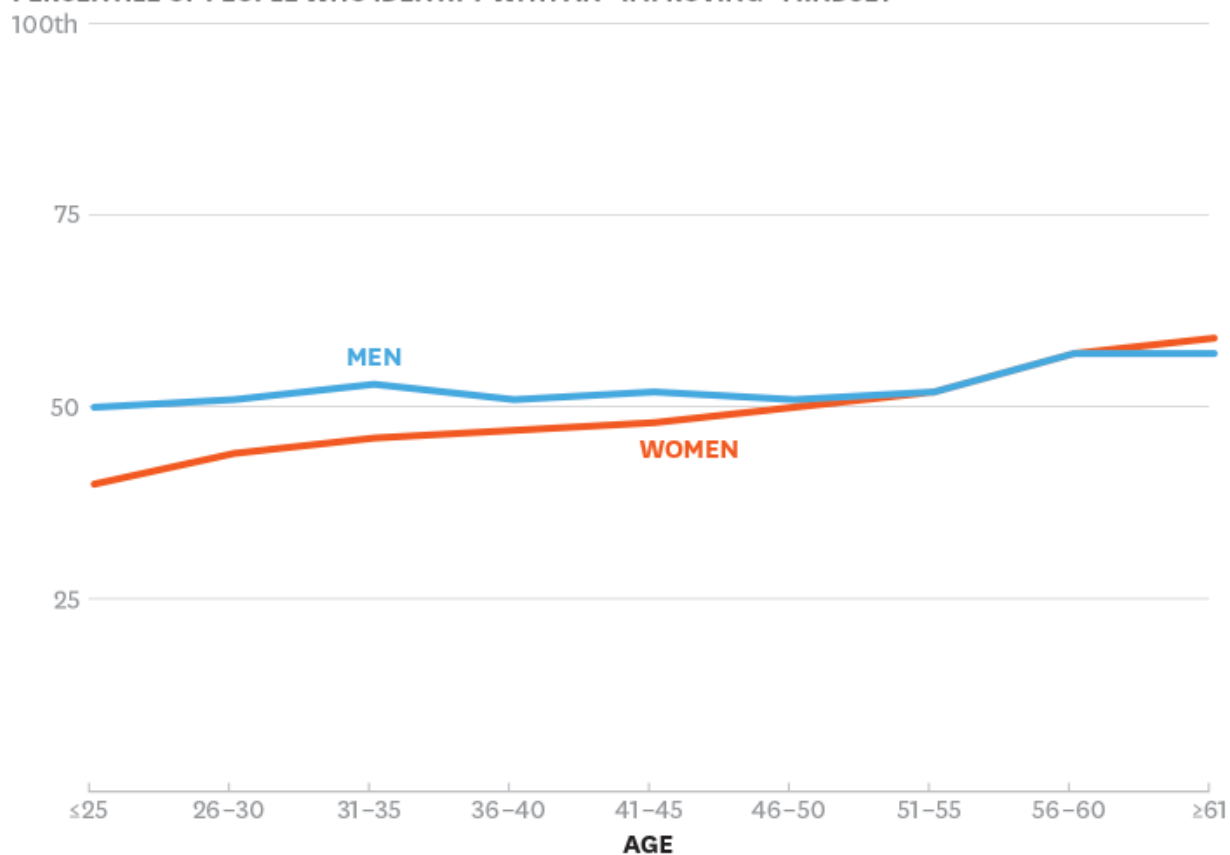
Take charge of your own development.

Still, the data was robust enough to help us identify three factors that influenced respondents' mindsets:

Age. As we age, there is a gradual evolution of a proving mindset into an improving mindset. The following graph shows changes over time. This may be because as we age, we simply become more self-aware - and it may also have something to do with confidence, which was the second major factor we uncovered.

The Older We Get, the More We're Open to Self-Improvement

PERCENTILE OF PEOPLE WHO IDENTIFY WITH AN "IMPROVING" MINDSET



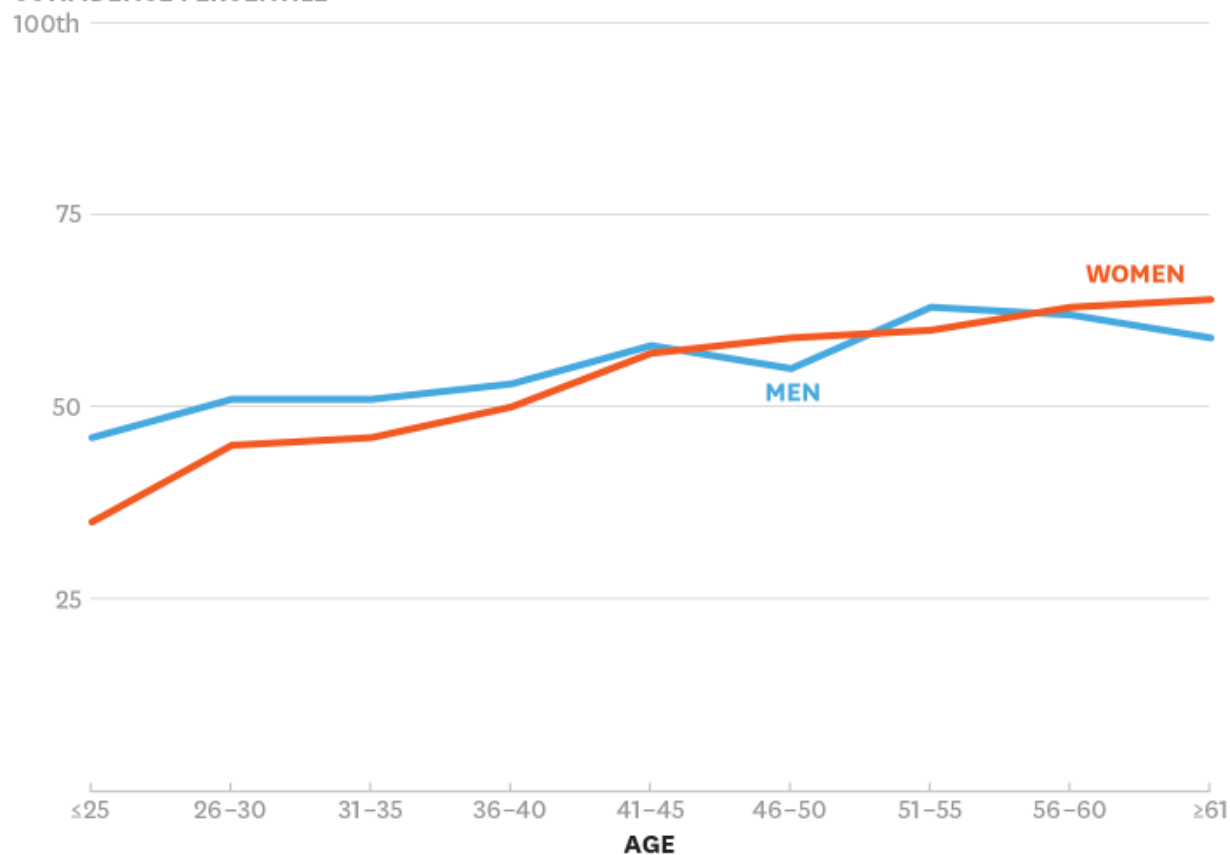
SOURCE ZENGER/FOLKMAN

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Self-Confidence. There is a fascinating and slightly complex relationship between self-confidence and an improving mindset. The chart below describes what happens to self-confidence as people get older. Note that males show improving self-confidence up until their early 40s, experience a mid-life dip, then experience rising confidence again until their mid-50s. At that point, their confidence tends to decline. Women, on the other hand, start out less confident, but show steady increases from their mid-20s until their mid- 60s, ending up more confident than the men.

We All Get More Confident as We Age, but Women See a Steadier, Sharper Climb

CONFIDENCE PERCENTILE

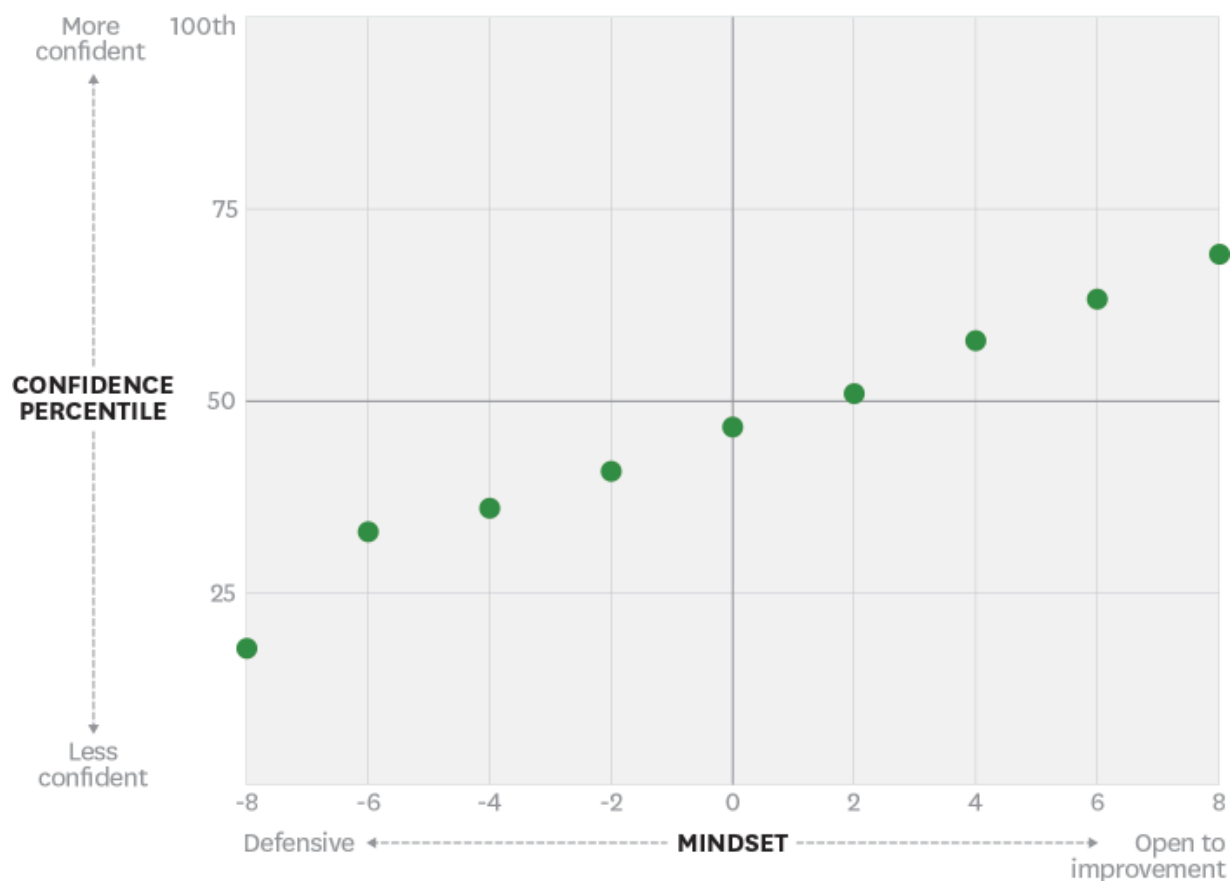


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Often when people are resistant to and defensive about feedback, they seek to convince others that they are highly confident individuals. Our results told a different story: in fact, people who are very resistant to feedback may lack confidence. (Of course, this is a tendency we found, not an absolute rule; we can no doubt all think of examples of highly confident individuals who also get defensive. And there's a lot of academic research that supports the argument that too much confidence has all kinds of negative effects.) In the graph below, the negative numbers show an orientation toward "proving" and the positive number toward "improving." The best predictor we could find of people having an orientation toward "proving" was their *lack* of confidence. Those who scored highest on our confidence percentile were more likely to have an improvement mindset.

Healthy Self-Confidence Predicts an Improvement Mindset



SOURCE ZENGER/FOLKMAN

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Some of these less confident people may even suffer from impostor syndrome - the fear that they don't really belong in their role, and they'll ultimately be discovered and fail. Admitting that critics may have a point doesn't just threaten their self-view, but their career success. "If I am not smart or capable there is nothing I can do about it," they seem to believe, "I will ultimately be discovered and then I will fail." The only option is defensiveness.

Gender: We also found that women are more likely to have a "proving" mindset than men are, especially early in their careers. There are a few possible reasons for this. For instance, women are socialized to be less confident, whereas men are socialized to be

overconfident. Many women are also subjected to what Joan C. Williams has termed “Prove-It-Again” bias, in which their competence is constantly (and unfairly) questioned.

Fortunately, we also found that women shift to an “improving” mindset as they age. Older men are also more likely to have an “improving” mindset than younger men, although the change is not as extreme. By their early 60s, women are more likely to have an “improving” mindset than their male peers.

Shifting to an Improving Mindset

Based on overwhelming research in the social sciences, we know that it is easier to change a person’s behavior than to change their attitudes. And mindset - whether “proving” or “improving” – is most certainly a complex set of attitudes. We recommend that anyone wanting to move toward a growth or improving mindset begin by asking for feedback from colleagues. Start with small doses and gradually increase the amount and frequency of the feedback you are willing to hear. You will learn that the information you gain is beneficial, and your willingness to ask will elevate you in the eyes of others.

Managers can also help subordinates move from a fixed mindset to a growth orientation by thoughtfully providing the right kind of feedback. Instead of praising raw talent and intelligence, it is far better to recognize and praise hard work, tenacity, and resilience. For example, instead of saying “Your TPS report is brilliant,” say something like, “Thanks for working so hard on that TPS report; your effort really paid off.” Such feedback has the dual effect of shaping the individual’s mindset as well as instilling within them greater feelings of confidence - which ought to make it easier for them to accept critical feedback from time to time.

We strongly agree with Carol Dweck. A growth mindset is the foundation for any successful personal development process. Our evidence suggests that people can change, but in order to do so must stop “proving” and start looking for ways to “improve.”

Career success is driven by a person's ability to constantly learn and adapt to a changing world. Doing so takes the right mindset.

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