



this  
must be  
the place

# 6 SIGNS OF A MISSIONARY GROWTH MINDSET

By **AMY YOUNG**

**Amy** Amy Young, MA, LPC served in China for nearly 20 years and is the CEO of Global Trellis. Amy has written six books for Great Commission workers including *Looming Transitions* and *Becoming More Fruitful in Cross-Cultural Work*. All Scripture references are *ESV*.

**W**ould you like to go to a dentist who graduated in 1999 and then said, “I don’t need to update my credentials or take more classes because I already invested six years of my life learning what I needed to know?”

How comfortable would you be to have your taxes prepared by someone who said, “I was up to date until 2018 and then life got really busy and I haven’t had time to stay up to date on the changes to the laws since then?” No thank you. I’m sorry life’s been hectic, but a lot has changed since 2018 and your good intentions are not enough.

It’s easy to see the flaws in their thinking, but how often have those of us in missions been guilty of our own version of this type of thinking? If you lack time, funds, or chances to learn more about what God has called you to do, you might have more of a “fixed missionary mindset” than a “missionary growth mindset.”

The good news, and with Jesus there’s always good news, is that whether you have a fixed or growth mindset, you can foster a growth mindset.

The idea of fixed versus growth mindset grew out of a study by Carol Dweck in which she researched



students' attitudes towards failure.<sup>1</sup>

Someone with a growth mindset views intelligence, abilities, and talents as learnable and capable of improvement through effort. On the other hand, someone with a fixed mindset views those same traits as inherently stable and unchangeable over time.<sup>2</sup>

I heard Dr. Heidi Grant speak on motivation and her closing line challenged me as I thought about Global Trellis, the organization I lead. She said, "Cultivating a growth mindset is one of the most important things we can do for ourselves, organizations, and callings."<sup>3</sup>

Maybe you're not sure whether your mindset is fixed or geared towards growth. Here are four signs you might have a fixed mindset as a missionary:

1. You feel you have to prove your ability.
2. You compare yourself or your project to others.
3. You doubt yourself.
4. You experience anxiety in regard to your ministry.

The problem with a fixed mindset in ministry is that you're vulnerable when things don't go well. Many who read this publication are involved in Church Planting Movements, Disciple Making Movements, or other ways of participating in the Great Commission. These ventures are fraught with challenges and if you have a fixed mindset, you will experience high levels of anxiety. This kind of stress affects your brain chemistry, your overall health, and makes you less likely to be open to new opportunities and less open to changes you might need to make. Why? Because a fixed mindset keeps you afraid of "failure" and keeps you erroneously focused on efforts to prove yourself.

I've worked with thousands of missionaries over the years and a common refrain I've heard is, "I lack time, funds, or chances to learn about fill-in-the-blank." Even with online learning having grown exponentially in recent years, many are not taking advantage of the learning opportunities because of the perceived lack of time or funds. However, missionaries being too busy to build in time to reflect on their lives and work, connect with others doing what they are doing, or taking care of themselves is not a badge of honor. It's the trap of a fixed mindset and it leads to burnout.

As I said, the good news is that if you see yourself reflected above, you *can* foster a growth mindset.

Just like you can tell if someone has a fixed mindset, you can also tell if someone has a growth mindset. How can you tell if someone has a growth mindset? The three hallmarks are:

1. A desire to improve your ability
2. A plan to develop your skills
3. The ability to compare yourself today to yourself in the past instead of to other people or ministries

In earlier eras, missionaries needed to be "front-end loaded" with information. There will always be a need for pre-field or new-to-the-field training. My hope is

1 "Decades of Scientific Research that Started a Growth Mindset Revolution." *Mindset Works*, [www.mindsetworks.com/science/](http://www.mindsetworks.com/science/).

2 Catherine Cote, "Growth Mindset vs. Fixed Mindset: What's the Difference?" *Harvard Business School Online*, <https://www.online.hbs.edu/blog/post/growth-mindset-vs-fixed-mindset>.

3 Dr. Heidi Grant, Global Leadership Summit, August 4, 2022.

that we move beyond thinking of training as an event or a season and we see it more as a mindset that fosters life-long learning in missionaries.

Let's get specific about the six signs of not only a growth mindset, but a missionary growth mindset:

- 1** You are curious—This curiosity might be about your host culture, technology, or *whatever* is currently impacting your ministry. It can and should manifest as a regular way that you view the world.
- 2** You build reflection into your life—Set aside time to consider what's working and what's not. Ideally you have small, medium, and larger reflection practices with weekly, monthly or quarterly, and annual times for reflection. At Global Trellis, every December we offer a "Reflect and Prepare" packet geared specifically for cross-cultural workers to reflect on the previous year and prepare for the next.
- 3** You invest in learning—Don't be like the dentist or tax preparer mentioned at the beginning of this article. Instead, set aside time and money to listen to podcasts, attend online workshops, read books, and connect with others doing what you're doing.
- 4** You are attentive—Heidi Grant encourages people to "notice, then shift."<sup>4</sup> She means it mostly in regard to mindset. Notice when you sense you have to prove yourself, are frustrated, or are experiencing anxiety, then shift. You can say things like "I'm not good at this *yet*" or "It's not about being good, it's about getting better." By noticing what's going on around and within you, you're able to shift. The power of shifting is that you're not ruminating on the past and are reorienting yourself to the future.
- 5** You are willing to change or redirect—Because you have spent time wrestling with the ideas of "success" and "failure" in


ministry, you are not wedded to outcomes. Of course, you're encouraged by outreaches and movements that are making positive impacts and love to see people growing in Christ! But you are not defined by them. If something isn't working, you're willing to move on and to try something different.

- 6** You share your mistakes—Be willing to talk about past challenging seasons you experienced and mistakes that you've made instead of hiding or downplaying them. You are able to talk about when you could have handled a situation better and what you learned from it.

As you read through the list, hopefully you saw yourself in all six. But if you didn't, you can start today to foster a growth mindset. A growth mindset won't just happen because you read this article and you think, "That's the kind of person I want to be!" Don't we all want to be this kind of person? But when you look around at fellow missionaries, you probably know people who operate out of a fixed missionary mindset.

You need to make the choice to foster a growth mindset because the pressure you're facing is going to push you towards a fixed mindset. You're made in the image of God, but you live in a world that has been damaged by sin. Thus, too many missionaries are stuck in the "it's all up to me" loop. That's neither true, nor is it the freedom that Christ gave His life for.

Look back over the six signs of a missionary growth mindset. Ideally, you'll get to the point that all six will be woven into your life. But if you're not there yet, choose one to focus on this month. If you see all six in your life, which one would you like to intentionally foster this next month?

Encouraging a growth mindset in yourself and others that you work with truly is one of the most important things you can do for yourself, your organization, and your calling. 

<sup>4</sup> Heidi Grant, Global Leadership Network, August 4, 2022