

of failure or setback. Novelty, public accountability and experimentation are, of course, common characteristics of managerial work.

The assumptions of people with an incremental theory of mental ability differ from those of entity theorists in many ways. Incremental theorists simply think less about mental ability or basic aptitudes as explanations for performance. In any situation that requires mental ability, they tend to think of performance in terms of skills, effort and strategies, which can vary from one situation or one problem to the next. These performance characteristics are also easier to change than basic aptitudes. For incremental theorists, experimentation, public accountability and novelty all pose less of a threat because they believe that you can always try something different when you encounter setbacks or failures.

Mental ability is just one human characteristic that features in the implicit theories of managers. Other important implicit theories in management include assumptions about the fixedness versus malleability of human morality and social skills. One reaction that differentiates entity theorists from incremental theorists in each of these domains is the degree to which their thoughts are focused on themselves versus the situation or problem at hand, in the face of failure and setbacks. When entity theorists fail to live up to expectations, they are prone to ruminate about how other people will judge them and become preoccupied with self-doubts. Incremental theorists may suffer the same distractions initially, but manage to shift their focus back to the task at hand more quickly and to think about strategies for recovery.

Another basic distinction seems to occur in how entity and incremental theorists frame challenging tasks. Entity theorists are more likely to adopt a defensive or avoidance frame while incremental theorists adopt an approach frame and attack the task more directly. If we think in terms of public speaking, an entity theorist will be thinking about things like: "How do I make sure that I do not make any mistakes or avoid looking ridiculous?". An incremental theorist will be thinking: "What approach or strategy will give the best presentation?".

One area where entity and incremental theorists do not differ is in measures

of their basic aptitudes. In my collaborative research, and Dweck's, the differences observed are evident after controlling for individual skills or abilities for the task being studied. Even talented people do not escape the threats of failure. High performing entity theorists often live with the fear that they have been misclassified and that the next test will reveal to their teachers, senior management or colleagues that they are really incompetent.

IMPLICIT THEORIES IN PRACTICE

Some readers may recognise themselves, colleagues, partners or their children in some of the examples and be thinking that I (or Joe or Mary or whoever) am (is) an entity or incremental theorist. Be careful, such labels are only ever partially correct, if at all. Implicit theories describe reactions to certain types of situations, such as novelty, failure and challenges; they are not trait-based descriptions of personality like the Myers Briggs and other measures that claim to describe general characteristics of individuals. So, while you or others you know might have an entity theory about mental ability (studies suggest that around 30 per cent of children do) you or they could have an incremental theory about social skills like public speaking, languages, writing or people management. Research has shown that implicit theories, like many other beliefs, are domain specific.

Implicit theories are learned and they can be unlearned. How easy or difficult it is to change an implicit theory will depend upon the process by which it was learned and how deeply rooted are the assumptions in the subconscious. A person who has been constantly exposed to the claims that people are either 'good' or 'bad' from early childhood to adulthood will probably have a deeply rooted and difficult-to-change entity theory of morality. However, even assumptions formed early in life can be changed. Many years of experience as a teacher and a parent have taught me that academic ability is much more malleable than I previously believed, resulting in my shift from an entity to an incremental theory view. In one of our studies, we found that Spanish university graduates who attended a two-year training program to become senior police inspectors shifted their implicit theories about human character toward an entity view.



My collaborative studies⁴ have established that you can overturn incremental theories by creating a situation that emphasises a strong entity viewpoint. Changing an entity theorist into an incremental theorist is more difficult or takes longer, but it can be done. An example of an entity approach is one where a supervisor or co-workers (or parents) constantly attribute achievements to fundamental capabilities and not to behaviour or strategies. Constantly telling a person that they are incompetent may make them feel bad about themselves, but it may also have subtler and long-lasting effects if it shifts them to an entity view of ability. Praise that stresses basic capabilities can do the same thing! Telling people that they are smart when they perform well can be detrimental to their long-term performance if it also produces an entity view of ability. Conversely, an incremental approach to success and failure constantly focuses on strategies, effort and other factors that people can change or maintain to influence their performance.

THE EFFECTS OF IMPLICIT THEORIES ON MANAGERIAL ACTION

A substantial body of research now shows that entity theorists and incremental theorists each respond consistently, but differently, to situations that are novel or challenging and to failure and setbacks. I will briefly mention three of the main differences and illustrate them with examples from research that I have done with others. Readers who wish to read further should consult the readings in the footnotes.

First, when judging other people and themselves, entity theorists use