

MODULE 1

# Defining and Preparing for Success



There is no one word that fully captures the feelings that come with returning to work after a break. You may be excited, bewildered, nervous, confident, or flipping between all of these and more. Our one word for you? CONGRATULATIONS!

You have officially returned to work and Path Forward promises to provide you with the tools and unwavering support you'll need to make this returnship – and beyond – a resounding success.

## **Begin With the End in Mind**

Let's talk about the word "success." Though it's natural and expected for returners to be focused on whether or not they'll get a full-time position at the conclusion of the returnship, we encourage you to reframe this time as a launching pad to many possibilities rather than a stop along a set track.

"I think about actions, not outcomes. That way, I stay focused on the things I can control (more or less). So I don't think about 'making the book a success' but writing the best book I possibly can."

– Gretchen Rubin,  
The Happiness Project



In a few months time, whether or not you have a job offer in hand, a successful returnship means:

- **New experiences**

You accomplished something of value that is useful and relevant to employers. You have officially returned to work and have fresh experience to add to your resume.

- **Expanded network**

You met new colleagues who can help you in ways both big and small. Your network has been refreshed with like-minded peers who are invested in your success.

- **Self-discovery**

You learned something important about yourself—from commute preferences to collaborative problem-solving to new technical skills.

These three measures of success are not separate and distinct goals; rather, they are tightly intertwined and, when combined, create the richest returnship experience. Try and embrace that through this journey.

## Traits of Successful Returners

Path Forward has supported thousands of people just like you who are relaunching their careers. Along the way, we've seen many inspiring examples of returners who made the most of their returnship experience. Though the particulars of each story vary, they all had the following three traits in common:

- **Engagement with the process**

Rather than wait for their managers to hand-deliver them the “perfect” experience or project to prove themselves, successful returners are active participants who seek every opportunity to make the program worthwhile. They embrace taking the driver's seat and actively pursue learning opportunities. Furthermore, they find ways to showcase their contributions, set goals, solicit feedback, and work to expand their network by connecting with peers, managers and other returners.

- **Open to opportunities**

It's likely that at some point in the returnship, you may be asked to do something that will make you question your abilities. Or, even if you're confident in yourself, you may be unsure if the role is an exact, perfect match for your skillset. The most successful returners understand that there isn't a perfect experience to be had. Instead, they embrace the opportunity in front of them and recognize that it has presented them with the ability to get their foot in the door at a great company and accumulate as many new bullet points for their resumes as possible. They are ready to seize the chance to make this experience work for them.



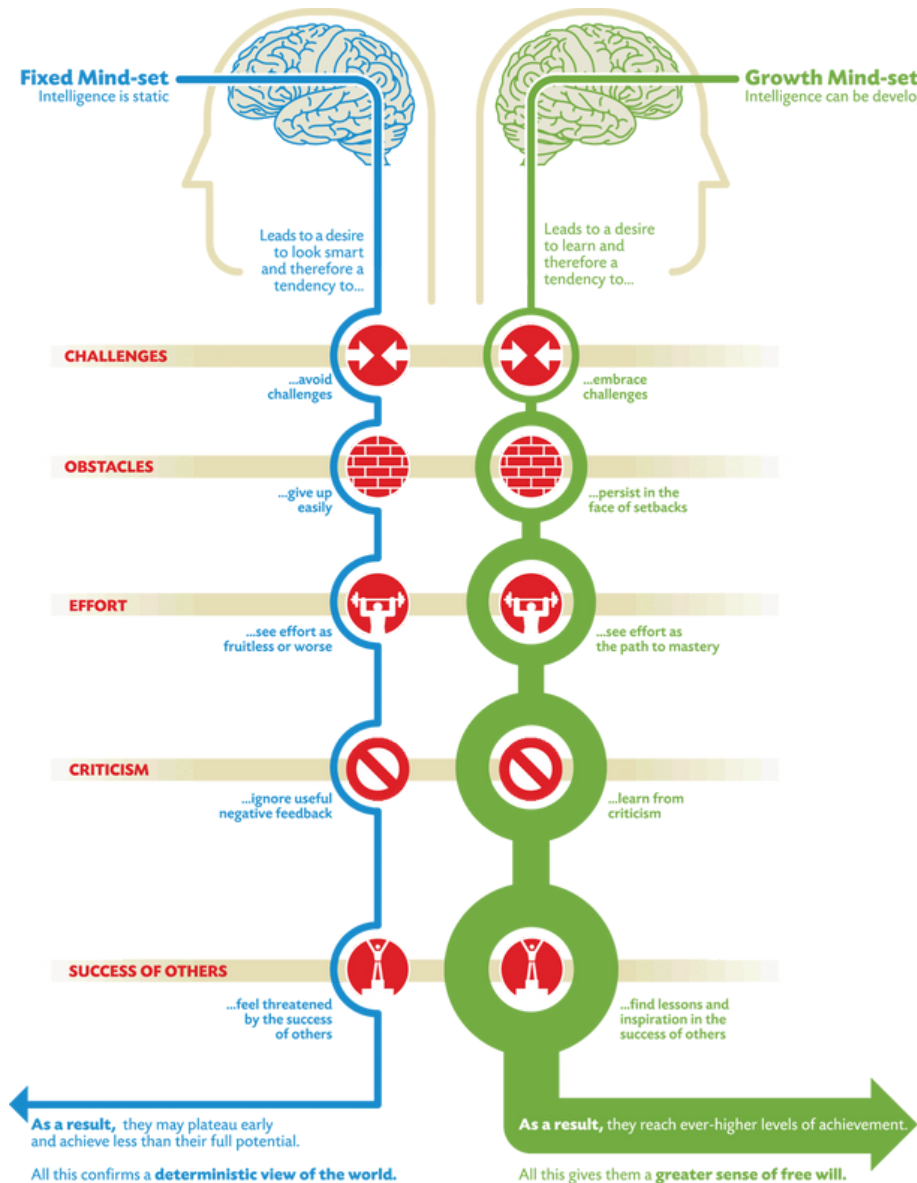


- **Have a growth mindset**

The most all-encompassing trait of successful returners is the growth mindset. Popularized by psychologist Carol Dweck, the growth mindset is derived from the concept that each person has one of two types of mindsets: fixed or growth.

As you can see in the image below, those with a fixed mindset tend to plateau early in their careers as they avoid the things that help them develop and grow. Those with a growth mindset tend to accomplish greater levels of achievement.

If in viewing this image, you believe your natural inclination is that of the fixed mindset, fear not. You have control over how you approach this experience. Countless returners in our community have confirmed that embracing the growth mindset is no easy feat. They had to actively choose to adopt and push through the initial discomfort because they knew it would benefit them.



Source: [Mindset Works](#)



Successful returners achieved this by doing the following:

### Learning From Mistakes

You'll likely make a mistake (or even a couple!) over the course of the returnship—everyone does. The important thing is that you try to learn from the experience. Understanding how you made it and why it wasn't the right course of action are the keys to growing. Doing so will set you up to apply the lesson in the future and avoid making the same mistake twice.

### Seeking Feedback

As "perfection" is ultimately unattainable, it shouldn't be the goal of any pursuit. However, you'll do the best job possible by seeking feedback from your manager and colleagues. Going out of your way to ensure you get constructive feedback not only helps you do a better job, but shows your manager that you're the kind of worker always looking to improve.

### Embracing Challenges

It's easy to shy away from taking on projects or tasks when we're unsure if we'll succeed. Still, returners who leap into challenges, despite the intimidation, yield the most satisfying results. By taking on these projects, they developed new skills and proved competency—and felt more confident as a result.

### Believing That Intelligence is Not Fixed, But Developed

Over the next few months, there will be more opportunities for learning than you thought possible. Be open to learning from others—even people less experienced than you! Appreciate that while you have a wealth of experience and so much to offer, there is always room to learn more. Inquire about any and every thing new, and seek ways to learn more if it piques your interest—from sitting in on meetings, taking a professional development course, or collaborating with teammates you otherwise wouldn't.

Want to read more about how others made the most of the returnship experience? Check out the [Success Stories](#) on our website!







### Setting Goals

Understanding expectations and setting goals helps you stay focused on your tasks instead of the ultimate outcome. Yet, even with the best attitude, there will definitely still be hurdles to overcome. For this reason, writing down your goals will help you keep your future visualized. Though plans often change as you learn new information, having a guide handy can serve to ground you when days get hectic or overwhelming.

Here’s an example of our Returnship Success Plan framework, which we’ll provide you with to help organize your objectives and action items. We recommend coming up with 3-5 goals that relate to your personal and professional growth and develop a strategy and timeline for achieving each one. Here are some examples:

| My returnship will be a success if...   | Strategy to support my objective                                       | Steps to achieve my goal  | Due date               |
|---|--|---|------------------------|
| 1. I build strong relationships with my teammates who are invested in my success and can help me learn more about the role and company culture. | Regularly meet with them to build rapport and leverage their expertise | I plan to ask for a 1:1 meeting with all members of my immediate team. I want to learn more about what they think about the role and how to be successful | Within first two weeks |
| 2. I refresh my presentation skills and feel comfortable commanding a room.   | Speak up in team meetings and seek other presentation opportunities    | I plan to prepare at least one thing to say in each team meeting. I will also ask about presenting project or data updates, all-hands calls, etc.         | End of first month     |

### Understanding Expectations

Returners sometimes forget that they are allowed to have their own goals for this program. You can—and should—express them to your manager. Discussing your managers’ expectations is truly vital to your success, but expectations are a two-way street; letting your manager in on your goals may help you both feel invested and accountable for accomplishing them. Sharing your Returnship Success Plan with your manager is a great way to foster that conversation. Make sure to ask questions that help you gain a deeper understanding of your role and your stakeholders.





Having answers to these questions will not only help you understand your manager's definition of success, but also help build a foundation for your own expectations and goals. We encourage you to check and update your plan often as you move further in your returnship and receive both formal and informal assessments. (More on feedback in Module 3.)

## Keep Yourself Accountable

One of the most often-repeated tips we hear from returners is the importance of keeping track of your accomplishments in real-time. Even in these early weeks, you're doing more than you may realize—and this returnship will go by in a flash. At the end of each day, write a few bullet points of things you've worked on. Even if you think it's too small to list, jot it down anyway. At the end of the week, you can take a bigger picture view and note what you've completed, what you're still working on, and what you plan to prioritize for the following week.

You can also share that information with your manager via a status report email at the end of each week. Creating reports like this helps your manager keep track of your progress and will likely assist in conversations about your performance.

## Coming Up

At the end of this program, you'll be able to confidently say that you completed a robust, competitive and exciting returnship program with your company. You'll have new projects to discuss, new colleagues and connections, and a firm understanding of what kind of work and environment you most enjoy.

Congratulations again and we'll be in touch soon!



Join Path Forward volunteers, alumni, and your fellow returners in our [online community](#) to find helpful advice, resources, networking, and more.

