

# Growth Mindsets in Coaching

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*cross-country-skiing*



## *My learning ground for a growth mindset*

I recently caught up with some interesting exchanges from a few months ago on a [ConnectedCoaches Conversation thread about Growth and Fixed Mindsets](#) (with thanks to [Dan Cottrell](#) for kick starting them). These had me reflecting on my use of the idea in my coaching and in work I'm developing around confidence, which I thought I'd share on ConnectedCoaches to spark further thoughts from others.

The idea of Growth and Fixed Mindsets comes from US social psychologist and researcher Carol Dweck. As she sets out in her book *Mindset: How You Can Fulfil Your Potential*, she found evidence of a significant difference in how we typically approach challenging tasks and the attitudes, our self-belief (or otherwise) and assumptions we tend to make about our abilities. These get reinforced, ingrained and played out in the way we talk – for example, we might say of someone that they are “gifted”, “a natural” or praise their seemingly effortless ability, as if it were fixed and given. Dweck points out that this can foster a certain self-confidence – up to the point when things don't work out or go right, typically leaving the person demoralised and not knowing why its no longer happening for them. In contrast, those with what Dweck termed growth mindsets typically are animated by challenges, seeing them as learning opportunities, worth trying for the experience rather than any anticipated or guaranteed success. Concentrated effort and focus, together with a more relaxed, less black and white attitude to failure seemed to be the hallmarks of the growth mindset.

The exchanges on the Conversation rightly point out that Dweck's notion of fixed and growth mindsets have been over-simplified, misinterpreted and stretched to near breaking point by some (and my summary no doubt doesn't do it full justice). Nonetheless, I have found the idea very powerful in at least three ways, briefly sketched out here.

## ***The Power of “...Yet”***

How often have you heard someone say “I could never do that” or “I'm never going to be any good at ...”? Especially in the swim coaching I do for triathlon I hear a lot of self-defeating descriptions – “maybe you can help me be a less rubbish swimmer but I'm never going to be any good.” And of course I only see a tiny tip of a larger iceberg of people who have convinced themselves they can't swim (or

cycle or run) so never make that first step to try and learn.

A variant with a similar, fixed theme is people beating themselves up and getting really tense when a particular technique they are trying out for the first time doesn't instantly happen – “oh why cant I do this, I'm just being stupid”.

In such situations with some clients I've found that telling them about growth and fixed mindsets offers a great way for them to slow down, be kinder to themselves and accept that learning a new skill or mastering something different takes a patient persistence. A short-cut route to the same effect, that I picked up from inspirational Rivca Rubin's Uptimism, is simply to suggest we attach the word “yet” to those self defeating diatribes: “I cant do this... yet”.

The results can be extraordinary, people surprising themselves with what they can do and finding an excitement and pleasure in beginning to master the activity.

### ***Coaching Boundaries***

Explaining the idea of growth and fixed mindsets to someone who is locked into that impatient, black and white, self-defeating “why cant I get it right – I must be no good” mentality has a second powerful effect. I've found it can give a simple and relatively safe way for them to reflect on their own make up. Here's where I think, as coaches, we have to be very alert to our boundaries.

As we talk things through, some of the sports people I work with become aware of how past events, their upbringing or difficult times in the past have impacted deeply on them. Whilst I will always want to offer a listening ear I think it's very important to not overstep the mark between coach and counsellor. As someone who has benefitted enormously from the expert, professional care of psychotherapists and counsellors, I can resolutely say coaches are not and should never try to be therapists.

I've found that the simplicity of the growth and fixed mindsets notion can allow someone to reflect for themselves, as deeply as they feel ready to go, the roots of anxieties or fears – and then adopt the kinder, ready to learn approach. That way as coaches we can also set a limit on the areas of our competence and where other professionals are better placed to offer their specialist support.

### ***In Praise of Learning and Openness***

Finally, one of the big themes that comes through for me reading Carol Dweck and putting her ideas into practice is about the excitement, calm humility and joyfulness of being open to learning as a coach. How brilliant if you can get this from pretty much every session you coach, from each and every client, all the inspirational coaching colleagues around you as well as from other varied and diverse sources outside of sports.

Sadly openness and humility to learn is not always a trait in evidence in some coaches. We can also sometimes have very black and white, dismissive views about what works in coaching. I suspect we all have an element of knowing better than others – otherwise we wouldn't be coaching. And all good coaching requires a core of expert knowledge. But do we always model the same attitude to learning and growth that we want those we coach to take up?

How can we keep ourselves fresh and open to new ideas and challenges? Top triathlon coach Simon Ward suggests that taking yourself out of your comfort zone, trying something new yourself can help put you back in touch with the feelings of a new, nervous learner. I've experienced my own journey in this respect, learning to cross-country ski – initially with lots of getting uptight with myself at each fall (there were many); to a kinder, Dweck-inspired acceptance that I needed to take things more slowly and step by step; to then loving the flow and movement, even seeing the occasional fall as part of learning, rather

than as a definition of failure.

And maybe attaching that magic word “yet” when we catch ourselves dismissing a particular approach or idea – rather than “that’s rubbish”, a gentler, more open “I don’t understand it or see the point of it... yet”.

**Great to hear from others about their experiences and reflections. Please add a comment below.**

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