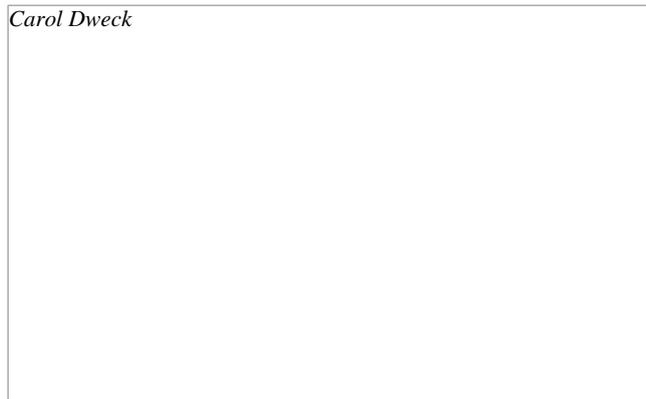


Growth industry: Advocating a mindset revolution in coaching

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Carol Dweck



Jeremy Frith and Rachel Sykes pictured outside Celtic Park with world-renowned psychologist Carol Dweck, left

Performance coach [Jeremy Frith](#) and educational psychologist Rachel Sykes explore the topic of positive development and application of mindset with athletes and young people.

- **Your mindset plays a crucial role in your level of achievement and success.**
- **The beliefs people have about their abilities shape their mindsets and therefore their behaviours.**
- **Coaches can help their participants fulfil their potential as performers by understanding their individual mindsets, and whether they show fixed or growth mindset personality traits.**
- **This knowledge can help you shape your participants' belief system and effect behaviour change.**
- **There are some easy to apply techniques that can be used by coaches to foster growth mindset in young participants.**

It is human nature to want to be successful in whatever venture you undertake in life.

Your way of thinking – your mindset – is crucial to whether you end up fulfilling your personal goals: achieving the exam grades you yearn for; flourishing in your career; reaching the performance level you aspire to in your chosen sport.

In coaching terms, understanding your participants' individual mindsets is an important first step in helping them fulfil their potential as performers.

More specifically, identifying if they have a growth mindset or fixed mindset: do they believe in their capacity to learn and develop their abilities, or do they think their personal qualities are genetic traits that are set in stone?

By having an awareness of where your participants sit on the growth to fixed mindset continuum for mental and physical character traits – such as resilience, confidence, motivation and strength – coaches can more easily begin the process of guiding their participants' way of thinking, with a view to cultivating a growth mindset culture.

Equal opportunities vision

The manipulation of athletes' mental traits to achieve performance gain is given a high priority in elite sport, where psychologists can work directly with athletes and alongside coaches, and time is not an issue.

With the concept of growth mindset now widely regarded as being a wonderful foundation for learning, imagine the impact if the majority of the 3.1 million adults who coached in England during 2016¹ had been utilising this powerful learning tool as part of their coaching methods.

In reality, while coaches may be aware of the work of Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck on the role mindset plays in achievement and success, most do not have a deep enough knowledge to be able to influence constructive action – shaping their participants' belief system and effecting behaviour change.

Getting a detailed fix on mindset

ConnectedCoaches member Jeremy Frith is confident that this will change and is doing everything in his power to enlighten people about the effectiveness of employing growth mindset coaching strategies.

Jeremy is an ECB Level 4 Coach and Coach Educator and a Performance Director for the Guernsey Sports Commission. He also works with business partner Rachel Sykes as an Education Development Officer for Growth Mindset for the States of Guernsey Education Department.

Before shining a light on some easy to apply techniques that can be used to foster growth mindset in young participants, the pair begin by providing a more detailed synopsis of fixed and growth mindsets.

'In a fixed mindset, people believe that abilities, intelligence and talents are fixed traits they were born with – in other words, that you have a certain amount of ability and that you can't do much to change or improve upon that,' says Jeremy.

'In a growth mindset, people believe that, with practice, dedication and hard work, abilities can be developed. This view creates a love of

learning and resilience leading to personal challenges and a greater likelihood of a person being their very best.’

‘It is these beliefs about abilities which shape people’s mindsets and therefore their behaviours,’ adds Rachel.

Super Mac and Super Brat

John McEnroe



It is important to note that people can still achieve with a fixed mindset, but they are likely to underachieve.

‘Having a growth mindset is very much about how people can be the best that they can be. It’s not about being **the** best but about people being **their** best,’ says Rachel. ‘Not that we can ever predict someone’s potential or know how good they could be. It is about the belief in constant incremental improvements.’

‘Take John McEnroe, for example. He would certainly say he underachieved in his career because he had fixed traits.’

McEnroe (pictured) was one of the most successful tennis players of his, or any other, generation, but he believed painstaking practice was a waste of his time as he considered he already possessed the inherent skills to succeed at the top level.

And anyway, he was practising when he was playing, and he was playing a lot because he was winning a lot! Such skewed logic might be offered as an excuse by someone with a fixed mindset to cover up criticism of the number of hours they spend fine-tuning their technique.

A reluctance to practise wasn’t the only thing that shackled McEnroe’s progress. When he lost, he would always be quick with an excuse, of how it was the umpire’s fault, how he was feeling the after-effects of a bug; basically, someone else or something else was always the problem, never himself.

Failure to acknowledge his weaknesses, and therefore muster a genuine commitment to correct them, meant they remained weaknesses for the entirety of his career.

Blaming others and not taking personal responsibility are traits seen in a fixed mindset when faced with failure or criticism.

This phobia of looking bad, seeing effort as pointless, shunning personal challenge and becoming so frustrated at his mistakes meant he famously earned the nickname Super Brat. Although this did not prevent him becoming a great of the game, some would argue it wrecked his chances of becoming the greatest.

Are you a lefty or a righty?

What about at the other end of the sporting spectrum?

A promising young footballer might be told by their coach or parents that they are ‘one-footed’.

The player, if they have a fixed mindset, may hold the intransigent belief that they cannot improve their ability with their ‘weaker’ foot because they were born right-footed. In their mind, their left foot will always be inferior and they can do nothing about it.

As a direct result of their mindset, they will stubbornly refuse to take up the challenge to improve their ‘weaker foot’ technique, and every wayward cross or skewed shot with their left foot thereafter will simply reinforce their belief.

Importantly, and unfortunately for them, their failure to master the skill could ruin their chances of making the transition from club level to county level.

The million-dollar question is, how can you teach people to adopt a growth mindset?

We know the formula for maximising your potential and being the best you can be means applying a healthy dollop of effort to your current levels of ability.

But in those who harbour fixed mindsets, learning to see effort as your friend, not your enemy, requires the help of an outsider with knowledge

and influence – which, in the context of this article, means a good coach.

Remember at this point that it is just as important for the coach to develop a growth mindset.

As Jeremy explains: ‘If you’ve got a fixed mindset about something as a coach, it will come through in some way when you are communicating directly or indirectly with the people you are working with.’

The table of elements

Jeremy and Rachel have worked on creating a mechanism to help coaches develop growth mindset, whereby sportsmen and women become more self-aware of their beliefs about particular skill sets. This is explained in detail in their book *The Growth Mindset Coaching Kit*. They believe it is helpful for individuals to be able to identify where they sit on the mindset continuum for different attributes within their sport before targeted training and education can begin in earnest.

‘This can be done in many contexts; for example, in the primary and secondary education sector, in business leadership, sport or any kind of professional domain,’ says Jeremy.

‘By identifying the skill sets that can be used to make up a successful performer, we can then ask them about those individual attributes; is that something they believe can be learnt, or is it something that they think you are born with?’

Rachel takes over the baton: ‘The work we have done with mindsets in sport indicates that some of those mental factors – like motivation, control, resilience – people tend to think of as being more fixed.’

‘Shifting fixed beliefs can take time. The first step is to help people see where they may hold these beliefs, and then changing them becomes a choice.’

Understand this: The rewards are huge

For many coaches, becoming immersed in the intellectual workings of the mind may add a layer of complexity to the job that is just too elaborate for them.

And being told that you should not label people as either fixed or growth mindset, that it is a misconception to be so black and white (‘in reality, no one has either one or the other completely’, says Jeremy), could cloud coaches’ thinking.

‘It really shouldn’t,’ counters Rachel.

‘The challenge of mindset is not understanding it – it is quite simple to understand – the danger is that it gets applied poorly, at a surface level, and lip service gets paid to it.’

Jeremy adds: ‘I think that was the thing with my sport, cricket. Some of the sports psychologists I know say that they are the last resort. Clubs come to them after they have tried everything else.’

‘A lot of coaches have never got into the psychology of learning, the psychology of motivation. I don’t think coaches can be blamed for that. There’s almost a stigma about it, something to do if you’ve got a problem.’

‘I think every coach, teacher or business leader needs to demonstrate to people that it can make a tangible difference to what they do.’

In other words, the obvious benefits make it worth the investment in effort.

‘If you can give people those very simple strategies to take away then they very quickly buy in,’ says Jeremy.

Tools and strategies

Something as simple as using the word ‘yet’ can be a powerful tool coaches can use to cultivate growth mindset.

As Jeremy puts it: ‘Learn to love and embrace the word.’

‘When participants say they can’t do something, add the word “yet” to what they say,’ adds Rachel.

‘It changes people’s whole perception of what they need to do in order to be able to do it. Maybe not straight away, or even in three months, but in time, they will get there.’

Another simple tip is to reward and acknowledge the effort, not the outcome.

So, for example, at a debrief following a match, even if you have won, don’t praise the result, praise the fact that each player fought back brilliantly in the first half from going a goal down; praise the team’s resilience to hold on till the final whistle against a late onslaught; praise an individual in front of their teammates for the fact they didn’t let their head drop after conceding a penalty, singling out their lung-busting display to make amends.

‘I find sometimes when I’m watching junior age group cricket that, if the team is winning, the coaches are sitting in a deckchair, drinking a cup of tea. If they are losing, they are up, pacing the boundary, shouting instructions,’ says Jeremy. ‘And yet, at the same time, they would be saying how “Learning is one of the most important things for my players.” Well, just because they are on top, they can still be learning things.’

That the outcome is of secondary importance is something coaches should also impress on the parents. Urge them to celebrate personal bests, enjoyment, learning and development over competition results so that it will encourage growth mindset behaviour to take root in their child.

‘Keeping children motivated because they are getting better, with the focus on their own development rather than on the outcomes, is so

important at that level,' says Rachel. 'That's one of the key things that is going to keep children playing sport and keep them motivated.

'So, parents picking their kids up from matches, the first question on their lips is so often, "Did you win?" Try to educate them that that is not the most important question. "Did you enjoy it?", "What did you feel you did well?"; "What do you think you would do differently next time?" – they are the questions you should be asking them. And if you watched them, simply say, "I loved watching you play." That is all the child needs to hear.'

The behaviour change process is a three-way partnership, then, between parents, coach and athlete.

And the fact that parents want what's best for their children should help to convince your partners in learning of the urgent need to change their line of questioning.

Take up the challenge

Challenge-O-Meter

Jeremy and Rachel have devised the Challenge-O-Meter, a simple tool that, if used well, can have a massive impact on learning.

They suggest coaches stick the poster up in the dressing room or the sports hall, or hand out individual copies so participants can Blu Tack them on their bedroom walls for easy reference.

‘Challenge is one of those things that is often determined by people’s mindset,’ says Rachel. ‘In a fixed mindset, challenge is often avoided for fear of failure. Here, we see people doing things they already think they are good at it, which means they are not going to be learning as quickly as if they are pushing themselves. In a growth mindset, challenge is sought and embraced.

‘So we’ve introduced this notion of 0–10 of challenge, with 9 and 10 being a really high level of challenge. The Challenge-O-Meter also shows what you might say to yourself if you are a fixed mindset, and encouraging you to challenge yourself back with a growth mindset.

‘The more you acknowledge that you are making mistakes and getting things wrong, the more you will start to realise, uncomfortable though the journey may be, that if you don’t challenge yourself, then you might not actually get better.

‘Having that language there before your eyes, and seeing the explicit importance of it, and how it is linked to failure, is incredibly useful.’

Now, it’s over to you

Please get involved in this fascinating, fashionable and fundamental topic by letting us know your views on the power of growth mindset to maximise athletes’ potential.

How has your own coaching behaviour impacted on the mindset of your participants?

In his blog ‘[Mental Muscle](#)’ (If coaches claim that emotional fitness is so important, why don't they spend more time working on it?), Nick Ruddock suggests ‘Drip feeding these mental messages throughout frequent interventions, further reinforced by a coach echoing the same messages in training’.

Can you offer some more tips on how coaches might build growth mindset techniques in to their coaching methods or drills so they do not have to deliver psychology lectures to a group of youngsters who have had their fill of being lectured to at school all day?

No sidestepping. Time to exercise your growth mindset and rise to the challenge.

[! Coaching in an Active Nation: The Coaching Plan for England 2017-2021, Page 17](#)

Next steps

If you are interested in learning more about growth mindset, Jeremy and Rachel have written a book called [The Growth Mindset Coaching Kit](#).

You can also use the ConnectedCoaches search engine to find more on growth mindset.

This blog is available as a podcast on a number of platforms including iTunes. [Listen here](#).

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