



Do you encourage a “Fixed” or Growth mindset” in your athletes?

We all understand that the way that you engage and communicate with people can have a major impact upon their progress whether this is in a working environment or within a sporting context. This applies to all age groups from the youngest to those who are not so young and although the following can be applied to everyone we specifically look on this occasion at those working with younger athletes. The above terms are often used in coaching so what exactly are fixed or growth mindsets? Simply put, it is the difference between those who are prepared to “have a go” or those who sit within their comfort zone and are perhaps not prepared to fail at something.

We all, I am sure, have seen athletes that are naturally talented who don't for whatever reason not make it past teenage competition, this can often be the ones who have, for example, an age or size advantage over those of their peers. Now obviously there are many reasons for this beyond anyone's control however often we see the later developers who have had to work hard to achieve what they have over take the “naturals” whilst the early developers drop away.

As coaches we need to be able to develop both of these athletes whether they are the “natural” or the gangly one who is all over the place when they take part in ability because they have not yet developed the skills. Perhaps when looking at “talent” we should look further than what is on show and delve further to support both athletes but using different techniques.

According to Lee Ness in his book “Growth” the following applies:

The Characteristics of a Fixed Mindset Individual

People are born 'Gifted'

People have 'natural talents'

Traits are set in stone

Intelligence is a fixed trait

They have a need to look smart at all costs,

Tasks should come naturally

They avoid challenging learning tasks

They hide mistakes and difficulties

In the face of failure they would reduce their effort or give up, become defensive, act up, act bored.

Characteristics of a Growth mindset

Success comes from effort
Success comes from hard work
Success comes from practice
Intelligence can be improved
Setbacks are a natural form of learning
Learn at all costs.

So what language should we be using to bring both our talented and our gangly athletes to their best? Here again I have extracted a section from Lee Ness's book who the following;

"Our young athlete is on her way to her first club athletics meet. She is lanky, flexible, and athletic, she loves athletics and everyone feels she is just right for it. Although a little nervous about competing everyone, herself included, felt confident she'd do well. She could already picture herself with her medals. She did well in the events she competed in but was beaten by stronger, more experienced athletes. This had never happened to her in school sports. In each event, she did well, but not enough to win. By the end of the competition, our young athlete was distraught."

If you were the athletes coach, what should you tell her? These are the typical responses and the analysis of them in fixed and growth mindset terms.

Tell her you thought she was the best. She clearly was not the best, athletics is a brutally honest sport that has no subjectivity. The tape or the clocks don't lie – you know it, and she does too. This offers her no ideas for how to recover or how to improve.

Reassure her that athletics is not that important in the grand scheme of things. This teaches her to devalue something if she doesn't do well in it right away. This is not a message you want her to take away from this experience.

Tell her how good she is and that she will win next time. This is a very dangerous message in mindset terms. Does ability automatically take you where you want to go? If she didn't win at this meet, why should she win at the next one?

Tell her she didn't deserve to win. This seems hard hearted under the circumstances and of course you wouldn't say it exactly that way, but be careful how you dress it up. But, if you have a growth mindset and you want your athlete to adopt the same, then you need to face the realities. For all the work we put in as coaches in training and developing the athlete, if they are unable to perform when it counts or to grow and improve because they are holding themselves back mentally, we are merely spinning our wheels. Whether you completely agree with Dweck's Mindset model or not, ask yourself this question. It could be correct, so if I implemented it anyway, what could be lost?

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Lee Ness – "Growth" , Daniel Coyle - "The Talent Code" and Carol Dweck – "Mindset" are all available from online book distributors and are all highly recommended.