

Mindsets – Fixed or Growth?

Coaches are often frustrated and puzzled. They look back over their careers and realize that some of their most talented athletes—athletes who seemed to have everything—never achieved success. Why? One is that they didn't have the right mindset. Research identifies two mindsets that people can have about their talents and abilities: a fixed mindset and a growth mindset.

Those with a fixed mindset believe that their talents and abilities are simply fixed; they are born with a certain amount and that's that. Swimmers with a fixed mindset who have a lot of natural talent may achieve great results early in their careers, without major effort, because of that natural talent. Being singled out as special and praised early on for their achievements can foster in them a sense that they will continue to be able to do well without the efforts that others have to make. This may be true, to a point. But with most of the swimmers who rely primarily on natural talent, there comes a time when they plateau. Since to that point they have always been special without having to sweat, struggle, and practice like other athletes, they may become so frustrated when they encounter obstacles or plateaus that they give up. The fixed mindset in these swimmers leads to the (false) belief that their natural talent will always keep them at the top of the heap. When they are not at the top of the heap, they experience so much shame that they often can't bear to go on. They can't give up their position of specialness, so they never progress to fulfill their potential.

Fixed mindsets in swimmers can show up in other ways as well. Coaches frequently find swimmers who, very early in their careers, define themselves by stroke and distance, e.g., "I'm a 100 fly guy" or "I'm a breaststroker gal." This is especially the case in high school where swimmers frequently carve out their niches as specialists. Some refuse to leave their niches, even when the process of learning other events can help them in their specialties or can lead them toward new successes. Frequently this occurs because engaging in new events may initially set them back to lower levels of success in terms of winning/losing and times. Like the "natural talent" swimmers, they are so afraid of losing their positions as "winners" such that they actually hold themselves back from improving.

Have you ever known swimmers who felt that every race had to be their best swim or that they had to win every race? And when the swim wasn't their best, or if they didn't win, they were devastated? These are fixed mindset swimmers.

People with a growth mindset, on the other hand, think of talents and abilities as things they can develop—as potentials that come to fruition through effort, practice, and instruction. They don't believe that everyone has the same potential or that anyone can be Natalie Coughlin, Dara Torres, or Michael Pheips. But they understand that even Natalie, Dara, and Michael wouldn't be who they are without years of passionate and dedicated practice. In the growth mindset, talent is something you build on and develop. It is not something people are given and that stays constant. Growth mindset kids are the athletes who look at each swim with an eye toward analyzing what needs to be done, both in practice and in the next race, to improve on each performance.

Almost every exceptional athlete has had a growth mindset. Rather than resting on their talent, they constantly stretch themselves, analyze their performances, and address their weaknesses. Dara Torres has certainly defied myths about age through her training and dedication. Using new training methods that better suit her body's needs as she grows older certainly points to her willingness to accept new challenges that keep her moving toward newly defined goals.

The passion that swimmers have for stretching their abilities and finding value in the effort of doing so, even (or especially) when their races are not going well, is the

hallmark of the growth mindset. This is the mindset that allows people to thrive and grow during some of the most challenging times in their lives.

How many times have you heard freestylers say, “My kick stinks?” Do they resign themselves to this statement because kicking is unrewarding, they hate it, and consequently rely on arm power, or do they challenge themselves to develop a stronger kick?

How Do The Mindsets Work? The Mindset Rules

The two mindsets work by creating entire psychological worlds, and each world operates by different rules.

Rule #1.

In a **fixed** mindset the cardinal rule is: Look talented at all costs. Jealously guard that talent.

In a **growth** mindset the cardinal rule is: Learn, learn, and learn! Take risks. Take chances, make mistakes.

Adolescent and college students with a fixed mindset say, “The main thing I want when I do my school work is to show how good I am at it.” When given a choice between a challenging task from which they can learn and a task that will make them look smart, most of them choose to look smart. Because they believe that their intelligence is fixed and that they have only a certain amount, they have to look good at all times in order to maintain their and others’ view of who they are.

Those with a growth mindset, on the other hand, say “It’s much more important for me to learn things in my classes than it is to get the best grades.” They care about grades, just as athletes care about winning, but they care first and foremost about learning. As a group, these are the students who end up earning higher grades, even when they may not have had greater aptitude originally.

What happens when you ask swimmers to race new events or to change their technique? Are they fearful of looking bad, or do they see it as an adventure or a new challenge? Look at age groupers that are great at the 50 yard races and then fade in their 100s and 200s. Some of these kids are reluctant to take on the challenge of learning to swim the longer races. They know that they probably won’t be consistent winners when they begin to compete at longer races and that they will, consequently, reveal to the world that they aren’t the swimmer who is constantly a winner. Others gladly take the challenge, partly because it’s fun and partly because it’s rewarding to see themselves getting better.

Rule #2.

In a **fixed** mindset, the second rule is: I don’t need to work so hard or practice too much because my talent will get me good results.

In a **growth** mindset, the rule is: Work with passion and dedication—effort is the key.

Woven into Rule #2 is the “Fear of Failure.” Those athletes with a lot of talent sometimes do not try for fear of failing. They do not put forth maximum effort, or they self-sabotage because they are afraid: if they give it their all and “fail,” their weaknesses will truly show. If they don’t give it their all, then they can always excuse themselves.

Those with a growth mindset know that they have to work hard, and they are willing to do it. They understand that effort is what ignites their ability and causes it to grow over time.

Rule #3.

In a **fixed** mindset the rule is: When faced with setbacks make excuses, blame others, blame your fragile shoulders/knees, blame your coach, or conceal your deficiencies.

In a **growth** mindset the rule is: Embrace your mistakes, confront your deficiencies, and seek help to understand and overcome them.

A fixed mindset does not give people a good way to recover from setbacks. After a failure, fixed-mindset swimmers/students make excuses, they blame others, and they make themselves feel better by looking down on those who have done worse. They do everything but face the setback and learn from it.

Sometimes we see adolescent swimmers blaming their over-trained shoulder or knee joints as an excuse to “escape” from hard training. The real task for many of these kids is to re-tool their stroke technique and reconfigure their primary events to suit their maturing bodies. For many, this is an exciting prospect, and for others, it is a daunting task to be avoided. In this situation we have two growth issues: physical and mindset.

Sometimes the fastest/most talented swimmer is not the hardest worker, and this swimmer becomes the other swimmers’ role model. Frequently these “role model” swimmers get leadership roles (e.g., captain) because they are the fastest swimmers. When these fixed mind-set leaders become team leaders, they frequently come in conflict with the coaches’ values and don’t turn out to be adequate leaders.

How Are Mindsets Communicated?

Mindsets can be taught by the way we praise. Praising children’s or adolescents’ intelligence or talent puts them into a fixed mindset with all of its defensiveness and vulnerability. Instead of instilling confidence, it tells them that we can read their intelligence or talent from their performance and that this IS what we value them for. After receiving praise for their intelligence or talent, they want a safe, easy task, not a challenging one from which they could learn. They didn’t want to risk their “gifted” label.

What should we praise?

Praising children’s’ effort or strategies (the process they engage in, the way they do something) puts them into a growth mindset in which they seek and enjoy challenges and remain highly motivated, even after prolonged difficulty. Thus, we might do well to focus the athletes on the process of learning and improvement and to remove the emphasis usually placed on natural talent. A focus on learning and improvement tells an athlete not only what they did to bring about their success, but also what they can do to recover from setbacks. A focus on talent does not.

Giving praise that is meant to boost self-esteem, at the expense of honesty, can also have negative results in terms of fostering growth mindset and success outcomes. A growth mindset coach will talk about effort and commitment. When a swimmer didn’t place as highly in an important meet as she had expected, a Coach might say, “You weren’t the best, today. Your swimming shows that you’re working hard, but you need better technique and better conditioning to swim faster. Those are things that you can work on.”

Swimmers' Relating to Coaches:

In relating to his/her coach, we may see fixed mindset swimmers:

- Wanting to be put on a pedestal;
- Expecting to be the favorite because his/her times are the fastest;
- Wanting to be made to feel perfect and/or special;
- Having a very public tantrum after a disappointing race and expecting the coach's sympathy.

A growth mindset swimmer might want a different relationship with the coach:

- Wanting weaknesses to be seen and wanting the coach to help the swimmer to work on these problems;
- Wanting to be challenged to become better;
- Wanting coach to offer encouragement to learn new things.

Where kids get their mindsets is not a clear issue. They probably develop their belief systems from many places: peers, teachers, coaches, parents. From a parent's perspective, they are acting on their kids' behalves, and most parents only want what is best for their children. But many parents bring their personal issues into their kids' lives. Many parents may come from a fixed-mindset perspective themselves and can't help but apply a fixed mindset to their kids' swimming endeavors.

For coaches and parents:

Don't over-praise intelligence and/or talent, and don't only praise results.

Do praise the effort and what athletes accomplish through practice, persistence, and good strategies.

Talk with your athletes about their work in a way that admires and appreciates their efforts and choices. "In practice you really worked hard on your walls, and your race showed it."

Focus on what your swimmers/children can control. Athletes never have complete control over winning. They certainly can control what they do, but they can't control what their opponents will do.

We should not assume that swimmers have the ability to do the kind of self-analysis necessary to identify their mindsets, and their everyday personality may block this kind of objectivity. Mindsets must be established with the help of coaches, parents, or others who are highly influential in the lives of young people, athletes, or others. Without help, we should not expect our kids to do it themselves.

One thing I always like to see is that the kids I coach are having fun. If they are enjoying what they are doing, they are usually learning and having a good experience. I also like to engender their ownership of their actions. I want them to be swimming and working

hard because they see an internalized value in doing so, not because I (coach) or others (peers/parents) want them to be doing this.

Conclusion

Mindsets are beliefs. Beliefs can be changed.

Praising ability usually results in decreased performance levels. Praising effort usually results in increased performance.

At the level of the swimmer, a growth mindset allows each individual to embrace learning; to welcome challenges, mistakes, and feedback; to understand the role of effort in creating talent; to accept that growth is change and change involves risk.

At the organizational level, a growth mindset is fostered when coaching staffs present athletic skills as acquirable; when passion, effort, improvement, and teamwork, not simply natural talent or results, are valued.

Growth mindset coaches are mentors and not just talent judges; inspire and promote development no matter what the natural talent may be; nurture a new generation full of athletes who love their sport and bring it to the highest level.

Growth mindset parents encourage their kids to take risks that engender growth; love their kids independently of their performance outcomes; support their kids through periods of frustration and disappointment.