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## LEADERSHIP IN COACHING EDUCATION

# A Growth Culture in Sports

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### Abstract

Mindsets, be they fixed or growth, are acquired over time and are deeply ingrained. Research has shown that when individuals believe they can grow their abilities, they are willing to take on challenges and not give up when setbacks occurred. Growth mindset followers tend to believe they can keep growing and getting better. Fixed mindset followers tend to stall out because they believe they cannot do any better than what they are currently doing.

The win at all costs mindset for coaches and players has been a common one in sport, but the growth mindset is currently trending and for good reason. Teams which develop a culture centered on growth are more resilient, motivated, and athletes find more joy within the activity. O' Sullivan (2019) explained that athletes with a fixed mindset may avoid difficult tasks and putting forth effort while an athlete with a growth mindset believes that effort and facing new challenges are the only ways to improve. A growth mindset can be beneficial for coaches and players and it can be the purpose with which a team culture is built.

### Growth Mindset and The Player

Players with a fixed mindset tend to believe that any skill they have is something they were born with and not necessarily something that can be improved upon. A player with a growth mindset looks at their skills and believes that hard work, coaching, and time all went into developing said skills. As a young player myself, I remember being a freshman on the football team and playing catch before practice. It was easy for me to observe those other freshmen players and see they were much better at catching the football than I

was. I can remember thinking how nice it would have been to be born with receiver hands. I know now that more time practicing catching and participating in hand-eye drills would have had a positive impact on my catching. It is interesting to look back and reflect on how silly that type of thinking was, but to also realize that some of my own athletes may be stuck in a fixed mindset. Dweck (2015) reminds everyone that a pure growth mindset does not exist, and everyone is working between fixed and growth mindsets throughout their days. It sounds simple, but players must believe that growth is possible for the individual or the team to improve.

What do we think happens in a team full of fixed mindset individuals? Dweck (2016) explained that fixed-mindset companies often have more reports of cheating and dishonest practices. She believes that employees use these unsavory tactics in attempts to move up the ranks when they believe their talent is no longer enough. I believe this pattern to be true in sport and team settings as well. Players feel threatened by their own teammates and trust will be difficult to hold onto on a fixed-mindset team. Later, we will discuss how a growth mindset can drive team culture forward. But first, the coach.

### Growth Mindset and the Coach

As the coach, a growth mindset can take you much further than a fixed mindset. Today, more than ever, coaches must be able to grow as individuals. Step number one is to believe that you and your team have the capacity to grow. In one study, athletes routinely remarked that an important quality of their coaches was their ability to be human, make mistakes, admit them, learn, and grown (Becker, 2009). Looking back at my first couple of years as a coach and an elementary physical education teacher, it is easy to see a young coach and teacher who was stressed, made mistakes, but was scared to admit them. I imagine this is the feeling many new teachers and coaches had during their initial years. It is a lot to figure out in a

short time and I wanted to be perfect at everything right away. I wanted to have pole vault practices that were technical, fun, and engaging. These were great goals and remain important to me, but when practices were not perfect, I let them stress me out. In these moments of internal panic, I know I came off as rude, hot-tempered, or intense to my vaulters. Today, I do a much better job admitting to myself and my athletes when I have made a mistake or a particular drill has not turned out the way I envisioned it. When I make a poor judgment on the correct pole to use or the standard setting, I just apologize to my athlete immediately and we go from there. We must make mistakes in order to ascend as coaches, and as human beings.

### Growth as your Purpose

When it comes to purpose in coaching, my answer has always been that everything I get out of coaching comes from the kids. In terms of a higher purpose for the team, this was an area I had not considered outside of the athletes having fun and trying to win as much as possible. Erin Quinn, Athletic Director at Middlebury College, said that great teams are motivated by winning like everyone else, but their process and purpose dictate everything they do (O' Sullivan, 2019). Not every team's purpose can be playing for a higher power or raising money for a worthy charity, but every team still searching for their purpose outside of winning can lock in on the process. Define your team culture by enjoying the journey and being laser-focused on what the individual and team can do to grow. This may or may not be a common practice, but our head track coach writes out PR cards for our athletes every single time they improve on their best time, distance, or height in a competition. There are 110 girls on our track team, but we sit down as a team, and we listen to the growth that each individual captured, and we celebrate it. When the wins are hard to come by, we will still be able to recognize and celebrate our growth and we will continue to commit to the process because it is part of our DNA.

### Conclusion

A growth mindset can be the foundation of your team culture because it frees all stakeholders from the fears of making mistakes. Dweck (2009) wrote that athletes will work hard to look like the superstars in front of their coach when he or she is perceived as fixed-mindset because there is no belief in anything but talent. However, coaches with a growth mindset tend to value passion, effort, and learning above talent and their players emulate these values in their play. To make growth the purpose for your team, you need to

talk about it frequently, explore how mistakes and growth are inherently connected, and be honest about your own journey with your athletes. From the bottom to the top, all stakeholders can benefit from trying to find a growth mindset as often as possible. This is how we ascend as coaches, teams, and human beings.

### Implications for Coaches and Coaching

A culture that fosters a growth mindset is subject to stretching one's belief boundaries that something unique and special can be accomplished. A leader will always have some followers who are eager to tackle challenging assignments and put forth untold amounts of effort. They will bounce back from setbacks and learn from the experience. Leaders also have followers who give up easily, avoid challenges, and do not see any point in putting forth effort.

As a step in helping followers adopt a growth mindset, a leader must have a growth mindset that even those with a fixed mindset can grow. To do so, the followers must learn that solutions can be found within themselves. Essentially, a leader must expand the fixed mind follower's belief boundaries and confidence that growth can occur when one puts forth effort.

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