

Mindset: Powerful Insights from Carol Dweck

Stanford University's Carol Dweck's research on Fixed Mindsets" (a danger) and "Growth Mindsets" (an asset) is essential for every youth coach and parent to understand. A growth mindset involves seeing your brain like a muscle that can get smarter if you exercise it. Jim Thompson interviewed the PCA National Advisory Board member and best-selling author of Mindset: The New Psychology of Success.

Jim Thompson: When I read *Mindset*, I kind of congratulated myself on how well PCA's "ELM Tree of Mastery" (**E**ffort, **L**earning, bouncing back from **M**istakes) fits with your work. But you say the impact can be lost if coaches and parents don't address the mindset question first.

Carol Dweck: People with a fixed mindset think effort is for people without talent. They are afraid of mistakes so they hide them. Learning takes a back seat to looking good. So they can hear you, but it's so opposed to their whole framework. It's in a growth mindset where people believe that you can develop talent—it's not fixed—that the whole idea of effort, learning, and confronting mistakes is inherent in the framework.

JT: You show how people with a fixed mindset can do well until they confront something they don't know how to deal with, such as an athlete going from grade school to high school, high school to college, college to professional.

Dweck: These transitions are monumental, and if you don't know how to make mistakes and learn from them, you're finished. A lot of the most talented athletes have coasted along. They've seen the lesser athletes working hard and they think, "I don't have to do that." But at some point they do, and they have to know how.

At a Scottish conference recently, there were championship athletes, people with Olympic medals, and they said they had not been the most talented kids growing up-- but the top kids didn't make it. All of the champion athletes were number three or number five. They knew they had to work hard to overtake the talented kids. The talented kids faded away at some point.

JT: What about enjoyment? It takes 10 years and 10,000 hours of deliberate practice to become a great athlete. I just don't see how you do 10,000 deliberate hours of practice if you're not enjoying it.

Dweck: I think enjoyment is *key*. You have to have a passion for what you do. It's not about your parents pushing you or your coach threatening you. It's about you just wanting to be better and loving every minute of it. Not every minute, but most of it.

JT: In our workshops for athletes we talk about a teachable spirit. We say it'd be great if your coach gave you feedback in a way that's polite and really easy to hear, but sometimes they don't. And if you have a teachable spirit you're trying to pull out of it...

Dweck: What you can use.

JT: Yes. What you can use. A growth mindset helps you enjoy what's going on because you see how you can get past the hard times.

Dweck: You see this in students with a growth mindset-- they use instructors, schools, whatever they can as resources for their learning. So they'll take what the coach says and they'll use it for their learning. They're not saying or thinking, "Is the coach being polite?" They want this thing and it's

their enterprise, *their* growth, and they are using the resources that are available for their betterment. We see this even in college students who have a growth mindset. They're not saying, "The book is boring. The teacher is boring." They're saying, "I'm in charge of my motivation and learning. I'm here to learn as much as I can and I'm going to do it. I'm not looking for excuses. I'm not the pawn of the circumstance, I'm looking for results. And I'm going to do what it takes."

JT: Do you think some people are born hard wired with a growth mindset?

Dweck: I don't think it's hard wired, I think everyone is born with a tremendous exploratory spirit, but some more than others have this inquiring inquisitiveness, getting into everything, a kind of tenaciousness that lends itself to a growth mindset. Some kids are more timid, more self-questioning early on.

JT: I love the term exploratory spirit. What can a parent do to reinforce the growth mindset or help their child move from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset?

Dweck: Well so many parents want to think, "My child is talented." Stop it! Talent is a starting point, but it's not the end point. Telling kids they're intelligent or talented actually stifles their motivation. It makes them afraid of making mistakes and losing that coveted label. It makes them also think they don't have to work hard. Their talent is just going to take them where they need to go. What we must focus on as parents, coaches, educators, is the process. Praising the effort, the strategies, the focus, the improvement – the process the child engages in in order to succeed.

JT: Instead of saying, "I love that cloud you drew," you ask, "Why did you draw a cloud that way?"

Dweck: Yes, "process praise" or "process focus" involves the adult wanting to understand what the child put into it and appreciating what the child put into it and asking questions about what comes next, or what are you thinking about? It's harder than saying, "You're talented, you're brilliant." But, it's so much more motivating for the child to feel appreciated. When you say, "You're brilliant, you're talented," and the child screws up, well, what does that mean? They think it means they're not brilliant, they're not talented, they better hide that. They make an excuse, maybe they will quit. But if you say, "Oh, look what you've put into it." Then they say, "Oh, OK. I've got to put more of that into it," or "I have to think about what else to put into it."

JT: It seems a dominant aspect of many coaches is a hard exterior: "Do what I tell you to do, learn what I want you to learn," but it seems like that might undercut the growth mindset.

Dweck: Well, yes. The more a teacher, coach, or parent says "I have the answer. I'm going to give you tasks, I am going to evaluate you and tell you whether you've got it or you don't," the more they set themselves up as a judge – the more they undermine the child's motivation, make them NOT feel, "It's my thing. I'm growing. I'm in charge." Instead, if they help the child develop his or her own talent, then it's the child's enterprise. And the coach is the resource.

JT: Boy, that just seems to go against the grain of the mentality of a lot of coaches. If I really know my sport and I know how to teach it, and I'm good strategically and tactically, encouraging my players to be responsible for their own learning may cause more losses in the short term.

Dweck: I'm not saying the coach is not the expert. The coach is the expert. The coach has the wisdom, the experience, the knowledge often to know what is good for the player. But the more he or she forces it down the player's throat, I think that's self-defeating in the long run.

Think about Tiger Woods, he was a winner. He was already considered the most talented golfer of all time. But he took his game apart. He dismantled it. He was willing to lose for a couple of years. People even doubted that he had the talent they thought he had, but he knew he was going to put it back together in a better way. So, if you've got a motivated team, one that feels they're growing, one that feels passionate about what they're doing, maybe it won't come together as quickly, but it seems as though it will come together in a more enduring way.

JT: How do you make the leap from a teachable spirit, a growth mindset in sports to, ok, I want to learn Chinese, and that's really hard? It seems like it doesn't always transfer 100%.

Dweck: No, we find in our research that the mindsets can be very area specific. You can have a growth mindset in sports (that is, thinking your athletic ability can be developed), but a fixed mindset as far as intellectual ability goes. I think, however, that it can be taught in a way that transfers across areas. When a growth mindset is being taught in school, say in terms of academics, it can be taught that it's true in every area of life. When it's being taught in sports – it can be taught in terms of other areas of life as well.

JT: Is it as simple as a coach saying, "You've got a growth mindset here on the team. You could use the same approach in school if you're having trouble learning something."

Dweck: Bruce Jenner, the great Olympic athlete, made that leap. He was incredibly talented in sports, and had a fixed mindset, really grooving on his talent, but he had a learning disability and he had to struggle in school. He saw that the struggling paid off and led him to learn. And then he thought one day, "What if I put that effort where I already have the talent? What will that do?" So he transferred it and said he never would have had the sports success he had, had he not had this learning disability. Had he not come to understand the power of effort to ignite your ability, to increase your ability.

JT: Back to the world class athletes in Scotland who early on were not number one. Maybe if things come too easily, it pops you out of the growth mindset.

Dweck: It can. It can. If you're winning all the races, you're not maybe pushing yourself to the max. You think, "I have it." It's critically important to convince kids that you get from Point A to Point B with dedicated, deliberate practice, without raising unrealistic expectations.

JT: One thing I really love in your book is that you model your journey from a fixed mindset to the growth mindset. How critical is it for parents to model that with their kids?

Dweck: It's tremendously important. I recommend that parents sit at the dinner table with their kids each night and say, what did you work on today? What did you learn today that you didn't know before? What are you struggling with? What mistakes? And they all should do it. They should go around the table, the parents and the kids should talk about what they're learning, what they're struggling with, mistakes that were useful. It's so valuable to model that process.

JT: One thing that really jumped out to me was the idea of having a vivid plan, for example if you have to make a phone call that you're dreading.

Dweck: Yes. Peter Gollwitzer found that people can swear up and down that they're going to do something, but if it's in this vague, amorphous way, it may or may not happen. But if people vividly imagine when, where, how they're going to do something, if they really get a mental picture of it, they're so much more likely to do it. So you say, "At 10 tomorrow morning I am going to make myself a cup of tea. I'm going to go to my desk, I'm going to lift the receiver, or get out my cell

phone.” You picture it vividly, then you’re much more likely to do it.

JT: You also talk about feelings being irrelevant.

Dweck: A lot of people are ruled by their feelings. Sometimes feelings are irrelevant. Feelings are information. And they often provide good information, but sometimes they don’t. So, you know there is something you have to do, something really good for you, you know it would be bad not to do these things, self defeating, and yet you could say, I don’t feel like, I don’t want to, I’d rather do this.

JT: I am going to wait until I’m feeling better.

Dweck: And those aren’t helpful feelings and you shouldn’t habitually succumb to them.

JT: I loved your analysis of “Groundhog Day,” and the idea that for the Bill Murray character, pretty soon the day is not long enough. It seems like if you’re really into a growth mindset, you don’t want to go to bed because there’s something more to do to improve and learn.

Dweck: It was so great because he was this jaded, sad, manipulative character, just caring about looking good and getting his way, but when he had to live this day over and over, he became more and more desperate until he got into a growth mindset, got into the whole idea of learning and helping and when we think about learning and helping other people learn, or helping other people in conjunction with developing yourself, each day has so many possibilities and they were so rewarding, there were such rewarding possibilities for him. Each time he relived the day, it got richer and richer and richer.

JT: Any last advice for all the coaches and parents out there?

Dweck: Well, it’s just to have your child love learning. That’s it. Teach your child to love learning.

JT: I loved the quote in your book about the two kinds of people in the world.

Dweck: It’s Benjamin Barber: “I don’t divide the world into the weak and the strong, or the successes and the failures, those who make it or those who don’t. I divide the world into learners and non-learners.”

JT: Thank you for being part of Positive Coaching Alliance.

Dweck: I’m very excited to be involved with PCA!

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