“Keep moving the footy!”

Scenario: I had two players last season, Tim and Ben who were both flankers competing for the same position. Tim was a player who was praised for his talents by his junior coaches, parents and supporters, reinforcing the belief that he was a naturally gifted footballer. Tim made every representative team he tried out for and played in the top team for his age group at school. Tim thought it would be a natural progression for him to be ‘given’ a starting position in the 1ST XV Team.

Ben on the other hand, was not a naturally talented footballer. He had struggled to be considered for the top teams all throughout his junior schooling. Ben played in the second team for his age group at school, with the occasional run in the top fixture when they were winning easily or when a player was injured. The coaches viewed Ben as a valuable reserve because he could cover a number of positions.

In pre-season, Tim and Ben were both selected in the 1ST Rugby Squad and were given the opportunity to train together. The coaching staff gave Tim constructive feedback on how to improve his efforts. Tim was surprised by this feedback and felt the coaches were attacking him personally. Tim became defensive and critical of the coaching staff, expressing disappointment in the level of coaching.

Conversely, at the end of each session, Ben would go to each coach asking the question, “How can I get better?” The coaches would give Ben constructive feedback on areas to improve his efforts at training to give him every opportunity to be selected in 1ST XV fixtures. The coaches were unaware that Ben kept a journal, for the entire season, and he would write down the areas he needed to work on to improve his game. Ben would write down the key learnings from each of the activities that he did that day. In addition, he would write down his goals for the next week based on the coaches’ feedback. Ben thought this would improve his efforts at training because he wanted to be selected in the 1ST team.
By the start of the season, Ben was the first-choice flanker for the 1st XV because he had developed his game with the confidence to solve problems in high pressure situations. Tim, on the other hand, found himself playing in the 2nd XV.

**What was the difference between these two boys?**

Professor Carol Dweck, a researcher from Stanford University, wrote a PhD exploring the relationship between success and having a ‘Fixed Mindset’ versus a ‘Growth Mindset’. Those with a fixed mindset believe that their talents and abilities are simply fixed. In this mindset athletes may become so concerned with being and looking talented that they never fulfil their potential (Dweck, 2009). I believe this is the main difference in this scenario. “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” (Dweck, 2009). Tim displayed a ‘Fixed Mindset’ and while Ben displayed a ‘Growth Mindset’.

**Can we change this mindset?**

Can we transfer from a ‘Fixed Mindset’ to a ‘Growth Mindset’? The answer is YES. People can transfer from a ‘fixed mindset’ to a ‘growth mindset.’ A prime example of this is Roger Federer. As a junior tennis player, Federer displayed a fixed mindset where he would often be defensive in his manner towards his coach and his parents. “He would cry when things went poorly, and send his racket skidding across the court after an error. On occasion he would whine at bad calls, slam balls in anger and argue with his father” (Walstein, 2009). This is not the player you see on the court today. Federer is a man at the top of his game who continually finds ways to improve even though he is widely regarded as the No. 1 player in the world (and possibly greatest player of all time). Federer recognised that he had a fixed mindset and worked hard to overcome this way of thinking as it was
impeding his performance and preventing him from reaching what he perceived as being his full potential. *No more breaking racquets, no more complaining commenting my game, at the end of day it was myself to convince myself that changing ... I think it is important to learn from mistakes and losses because you learn more here than in winning*” (Federer, 2013).

Coaching pedagogy is quickly evolving with plenty of information available on new techniques, game structures and methods of physical preparation that are influencing the game of Rugby Union. We need to look at innovative ways to improve the standard of play across all levels of the game, in particular schoolboy and club Rugby. The paper, “*Keep moving the footy,*” analyses human behaviour, using the concept that examines Dweck’s ‘fixed mindset’ and ‘growth mindset’ by Dweck. The key characteristics of the players with a fixed mindset will be examined along with the key characteristics of the players with a growth mindset.

*In the game of Rugby, consideration will be given to how we change human behaviour of coaches and players from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset.* The purpose of this paper is to provide a simple framework in Rugby Union for all coaches to improve the performance standard of their team. This includes giving the coach simple tools to review their own performance, and looking at how human behaviour can help players and coaches grow and adapt to different situations that confront them every day.

People who have a fixed mindset have a strong desire to have a positive self-image, are concerned about protecting themselves and worried about the judgement of others. These people who have a fixed mindset will avoid challenges, give up if they see the obstacles being too difficult, associate effort with failure, find it difficult to receive feedback on their performance and struggle dealing with the success of other players in the team.
From a Rugby perspective, as coaches, it is valuable to analyse the following symptoms of a fixed mindset approach from a player:

**Avoid challenges** when we see a player cutting corners in a passing activity because they do not want to be exposed in the activity e.g. you have four players passing a ball from left to right going down the field and you observe one player is always the last player to receive the ball; this player is demonstrating a fixed mindset.

- A player with a fixed mindset who does not want to get involved because the **obstacle is too big** and they would rather give up before exposing their weakness to the group, the coach and, heaven forbid, inviting coaching and correction. You could have a player in your team who could be one of your better performers but may be shy and struggle to speak in front of their team mates. He would be happy to engage in conversations where it is small groups, but would struggle speaking in front of the whole team because the little voice in his head would saying “Keep quiet and don’t say anything because you will look dumb.”

- **Effort is viewed** by a fixed mindset player as failure; an example of this could be a winger who may struggle to develop their kicking game. The winger starts comparing his efforts with the fly half who is kicking the ball consistently. The winger is not quite up to the mark and in turn will view his efforts as a failure. The winger would continue to work on the same kick that he is already adept at which would make him appear successful in front of his team mates. A player that demonstrates a fixed mindset may not listen to the constructive feedback or the coaches could have judged the player’s ability after only a few sessions. Players and coaches with a fixed mindset will be defensive about their skill level and they will associate effort with failure. Also let’s not forget this can apply to coaches too – a forward’s coach may be very good with breakdown play but shy away from scrum coaching as he feels he does not know it or understand it and therefore would be exposed if he tried to work in that area. In a one on one review, the player would be trying to justify his actions to the
coach and making up excuses for his effort or deflecting the blame onto other players who are in the team.

The **success of others** is when a player feels threatened by the improvements of other players around them. You often see in junior football, a player who performed well as a child and received constant praise, suddenly stops trying because he believes he is a natural. Once players improve their game, Johnny will feel threatened and try to convince himself and others that it is down to luck.

People who have a Growth mindset have a strong desire to learn new ideas and improve their ability to problem solve in difficult situations. These people who have a Growth mindset will embrace challenges, persevere when they encounter setbacks, believe that effort and failure is required to master a skill, learning from the feedback given about their performance and using the **success of their team mates as a source of inspiration** to improve their skill level. A prime example of a player with a growth mindset is Michael Jordan. After he was famously dropped by his coach at Laney High School. He would challenge himself to be a better performer. What does this mean from a Rugby perspective? As coaches, let’s look at scenarios where Growth mindset may occur.

In a rugby team, you have two players competing for the same position - one player will embrace the challenge and play anywhere the coach sees fit. When a player who has been moved down a grade continues to participate in the extra skills training being run by the top team after training, this player continues to work hard even though the setback has been initially difficult; a player who is focused on self-improvement, views **effort and failure as the foundation to mastery of skill**. An example of this, could be a player who focuses on micro passing activities to improve left hand passing under pressure while fatigued.
Constructive criticism can be difficult for a coach to give and a player to receive. Understanding the player’s mindset will alter the feedback given. However, a player who has a growth mindset will take key learnings from the meeting rather than ‘taking it personal.’ An example of this, could be a player who has set a target, but it is underperforming because they are not giving 100% effort and may be distracted from the process of achieving their goal. A player with a growth mindset would see the success of a team mate as a source of inspiration. They would use the opportunity to learn and evolve by asking the best player in the team many questions about preparation and performance. For example, Reggie made the Australian Schoolboys team and Jimmy, his team mate, is a keen and enthusiastic Rugby player who wants to develop his game. Reggie might give advice on how to prepare for the week, and could give Jimmy position-specific advice. When players see their teammates achieve good things in the game, it will motivate the players to improve their efforts in training.

Your players may be developing good habits using a growth mindset and their attitude improves when they start seeing themselves execute the skill to a higher degree than previously performed. Everyone is pleased with their efforts, however, what happens when they encounter a challenge that is difficult? As a coach, when you see your team going through a tough period they start to experience negative thoughts. The fixed mindset starts to reappear, and individuals can revert to old habits. “The little bugger” is my term for the fixed mindset voice in your head, telling you to “Give up!” “Don’t look stupid in front of your mates!” “You are a failure!” “Why are you wasting time?” “Don’t say anything because you may look dumb in front of your peers!” The little bugger loves to voice his opinion when you are finding tasks difficult. How do you keep the little bugger quiet in challenging moments? Get the players to ask the little bugger growth mindset questions. “Why is it breaking down?”, “How could I do this better next time?”, “What do I need to work on to improve this skill?” If a player is continually asking questions of themselves in training and in matches, they
develop that self-awareness of problem areas which will help the improve their focus in adversity. It also builds resilience.

"I think the big thing is don't be afraid to fail. In our society today - you know, Instagram, Twitter, it's a highlight reel. It's all the good things. And then when you look at it, you think, like, wow, when you have a rough day or your life's not as good as that, you're failing. Failure is a part of life. That's a part of building character and growing. Like, without failure, who would you be? I wouldn't be up here if I hadn't fallen thousands of times, made mistakes. I think when you look at a struggle in your life, just know that that's just an opportunity for your character to grow. And that's just been the message. Simple. Like, if something's going on in your life and you're struggling, embrace it, because you're growing" (Foles, 2018).

“Instructors who held a more entity (versus incremental) theory were not only more likely to diagnose low ability and comfort students based on just one low initial performance, but they also directly reported that they did not expect as much future improvement for their student” (Rattan et al, 2012, p.735). If you want to change your coaching approach to a growth mindset it will take some time because as a coach, one of the challenging things to do is to evolve your coaching. Changing your thought process can be difficult because you have been shaped by philosophies based on past experiences as a player and as a coach, mentoring from other coaches, and information provided from the governing body about the current trends of the game.
A few areas where you can improve your coaching include:

1. Always praising the effort and practice of your players instead of the outcome. Be selective with your words when you offer encouragement.

2. Using the term “yet” in your coaching when a player has not quite mastered the skill that they are trying to execute. Players will be encouraged to maintain their focus and keep developing their skill level. Using the word “yet” will help the player understand that they are on a learning curve.

3. Avoid using the word “but” in your conversations with the players especially during one on one feedback. This term is a fixed mindset word that could be easily misinterpreted. When the players here the word “but” all they think about is that effort they put forward was not adequate.

4. If your players are not executing the activity in the manner you want, ask the players how to solve the problem. It is making the players constantly think about their actions and identify ways to improve their performance.

5. “Failure” is currently a taboo word at training session. Players do not want to perform poorly in front of their team mates and coaches. With a Growth Mindset, teach the players to embrace failure and ask them what are the key learnings from the mistakes that we made in training today?

6. Create growth mindset “effort” comments that you could use in training when you are addressing your players. i.e. “Johnny, we can see you have intent in your efforts in this tackling activity.”

7. If a player starts engaging in negative self-talk or bows their head when they execute a skill poorly, address it immediately with a growth mindset question. i.e. How do you rate your effort based on the coaching cues? What can you do next time to improve it?
8. If you are implementing a growth mindset with your team, be conscientious of making excuses because it develops a fixed mindset. Hold high expectations for both low and high ability players i.e. avoid phrases like 'We were robbed of a win last Saturday' or 'it just wasn’t your day, Johnny.'

9. Think back to my earlier example. Ben developed a growth mindset because he continually asked coaches questions and did not become complacent with his development whereas Tim developed a fixed mindset because he was always praised about his talent.

10. When you are discussing the performance of a fixed mindset player, stand next to them and deliver the feedback.

In summary, I have looked at what coaches can do to implement Growth Mindset in their coaching and what could players do improve their performance through adopting a growth mindset.

   1. Embrace feedback.
   2. Use the coaching cues as a checklist to analyse performance.
   3. Ask other players how they perform a skill? Or what did they do to improve their skill sets?
   4. Give 100% efforts. Ask yourself “how I can do it better?” irrespective of if you have succeeded or failed.
   5. Reflect on your performance during the week. Create a detailed plan on what you are going to do and how you are going to do it.

Human behaviour influences all parts of the game and if you are aware of the players’ mindset, you will have a positive influence on your team. Teams with a growth mindset understand that effort is the driver to improved performance and when they experience failure or a setback it is the most important part of the process to grow.
Bibliography


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