

# ARU LEVEL THREE COACHING COURSE

## ASSIGNMENT TASK 9

**COACHES MINDSET**  
**GROWTH OR FIXED**

**GRANT ANDERSON**

*This is a discussion paper relating to effective coaching practices through development of a growth mindset. Although much of this paper is referenced to my personal thoughts, experience and practices, the wider theory is related to the work of Prof Carol Dweck of Stanford University.*

## Introduction

To be the most effective coach you can be, you must be deliberate in your approach to improvement. In the same vein as we as coaches demand our players to become self-aware and try to empower them to strive for excellence and thrive on challenges and feedback, we must also heed our own advice and implement what we preach to our own development as a coach.

To be concise, serious coaches who strive to be great must be willing to subject themselves to endless self-evaluation and peer review. First and foremost, coaches must arm themselves with the proper attitude and mindset.

## Fixed and Growth Mindset

Through an enormous amount of research, Prof Dweck has identified two distinguished mindsets that people can have about their talents and abilities. These are Fixed and Growth mindsets. I endeavour to relate these mindsets to coaching. Coaches with a fixed mindset believe that their talents and abilities are simply fixed. They were born with a certain level of ability or amount of talent and that's that. In this mindset coaches, may become so concerned with being and looking talented that they never fulfil their potential.

Coaches 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. These types of coaches don't believe that every coach has the same potential or that anyone can be a coach like Alastair Clarkson from the Hawthorn Football Club, but they understand that even Alastair Clarkson wouldn't be the coach he is without years of passionate and dedicated practice and learning.

In developing a growth mindset, we begin to realise that coaching talent is something you build on and develop and is not something you simply try to display and try to coast to success on. Fixed mindset coaches have limited longevity and often end up copying and trying to replicate other coaches.

Almost every truly great coach from Bill Belichick to Alex Ferguson, Alastair Clarkson to Vince Lombardi, has had a growth mindset. Not one of these coaches rested on their talent alone; they constantly challenged themselves, analysed their own performance, and addressed and improved their coaching weaknesses.

The simple rule in developing into a growth mindset coach is LEARN, LEARN, LEARN. Coaches with a developed growth mindset identify that learning to coach is something that never stops regardless of perceived talent and ability or previous successes. These coaches also emphasize processes over results. An extraordinary example of this can be seen during the

2017 NFL Super Bowl between the New England Patriots coached by arguably the greatest NFL coach of all time, Bill Belichick, and the Atlanta Falcons. While his team was losing, Belichick continued to stress to the players to focus on the processes rather than the score or potential result. While he believed that if every player did their job within the framework of the team and the units they played in and focused their mindset on their individual skills then the team would be successful. The Patriots proceeded to win the game.

I also believe that the best coaches are not afraid to make mistakes. In fact, coaches with a growth mindset often make the most mistakes. The difference is that these coaches realise that mistakes allow them to learn something that helps them develop into a better coach. In my endeavour to focus on a growth mindset I have also developed a greater resilience to adversity. Something that Prof Dweck indicates from her research is that people with growth mindset show an increased resilience to set backs and persist in the face of failure.

There is no linear line to success as a coach. It's a roller-coaster of peaks and troughs, swings and roundabouts, ups and downs. It's how the coach deals with these changes that defines their resilience and focus on their mindset. Embracing the wavering journey of the coaching roller-coaster opens psychological processes that protect the coach from certain negative effects by filtering out the stresses and anxieties of performance.

As a coach with a growth mindset I am aware of the stresses associated with performance outcomes i.e. winning, and taking responsibility when faced with adversity. This adversity can either be used as an excuse for under performance (e.g. "the other team are unbeaten this season, have much better players and they will probably beat us") or it can be seen as a challenge (e.g. "the other team are unbeaten this season, and have excellent players, I look forward to testing my coaching skills against the best"). It's easy to see which mindset is more beneficial. With increased adversity and challenge comes an increase in effort and with effort comes development. A combined effort allows a coach to adopt a mindset focused on growth and development from both adversity and success to guide future performance.

Developing a growth mindset is something that must be practiced, just like any other skill. Through my own experience, I will endeavour to outline some practices that can be used on the journey to developing a growth mindset coaching philosophy.

**Belief** – Before anything else I think that maintaining both self-belief and personal perspective throughout your coaching career is critical. Ultimately it is our ability to control our limiting beliefs and fixed perspectives on improvement that separate ordinary coaches from extraordinary coaches. If you believe you are or are not able to do something, then you are usually correct. When coaching in an area that I believe I am not necessarily strong in I don't allow myself to believe that I cannot coach that skill or within that area. What I strive to do is believe that I have the capacity to learn about that area of the game and the skills required to be coached and accept that I will not be perfect or an expert right away but will improve as a coach which will in turn create better players with better skills.

**Develop Humility** – I cannot overstate the importance of humility. As a coach we are the leaders of our teams and players, we are the most experienced, and we are responsible for the overall performance of the team. A good way to think about this is to remember that

when things go wrong you need to reflect on yourself and your coaching. Ask yourself “how can I do better” not “how can the players do better” As a coach you must try to see what other people see in you and your actions. Examine how exactly are you leading and coaching the team. The inverse side of this is that when there is success you need to give the praise and credit to the multitudes of people that made it happen while not accepting any of the credit for the success. This is the fundamental basis of coach humility. In the history of sport, personal glory is always more finely polished by humility. Remember, great coaches aren't defined by their own accomplishments, but by how they can move ordinary people to acts of greatness.

**Maintaining Focus** – Take time to collect your thoughts and establish your focus on a growth mindset. It is very easy to slip into a fixed mindset and coach within the parameters that you feel comfortable with. Before training sessions and games, I find it very beneficial to take time to focus on what I want to achieve during the session. This is normally focused on what I want to learn from the session or the players involved or how I can challenge the players and myself more. During the chaos of a match or training session it is easy to slip back to a fixed mindset and just “get through” the session or the game. This is when it is most important to reset your focus to ensure you are coaching at your best. I use the simple method of composing a short list of coaching points that I keep in my pocket during training or games. On this list is usually three or four “refocus points” that I look at and serve as reminders that when read helps me to direct my focus back to where I want it to be. Because I am emotionally collected and focused when I write the list I have found this strategy to be very effective in helping me regain focus during the training session or game. It is a quick trick to help keep you focused on improving your self-control and maintaining focus as a coach- especially when things get crazy on the field.

**Constantly Re-evaluate** - It is always very gratifying to watch your team play after all the hard work at training. Coaches with a growth mindset see games as an opportunity to re-evaluate and see where you can improve as a coach and how you can help develop the player's skills and abilities so they may excel in the processes of the game. Fixed mindset coaches focus on the result and the limited ability of the players. As coaches, we must continually re-evaluate what we are coaching to challenge ourselves to become better.

**Coaching role model and mentor** - I cannot stress the importance of this enough. You must have an example by which to begin shaping your coaching style and career. Choosing an effective coaching role model is important for anyone who seeks to improve their skills as a coach. It is equally important to find a coaching mentor or mentors who you can communicate with to learn more about the game and developing your skills as a coach. Bill Belichick is my coaching role model. I seek information on his coaching philosophies and style whenever I can.

**Education and learning is key** - The fundamental basis of a coaching growth mindset is learning. As a coach, we will never have all the answers for our players or ourselves. I have found that my biggest challenge towards shifting to a growth mindset is saying “I don't know”. This has been very challenging particularly working within a peer group environment. However, with a growth mindset I am no longer worried about not knowing something, I am more excited about the possibility of learning something new as I seek out the solutions to

the questions I don't know. On my mission to seek answers, I consider the source of the learning and then ascertain as to whether the knowledge will work for me personally. I try to attend as many credible clinics, camps, and seminars as possible. Once I have the knowledge presented, I examine it to see if it matches up with my coaching principles and coaching philosophy, if it does, I keep it and work towards implementing the knowledge into my coaching, if it doesn't I throw it out. You will know you are in the right place as a coach when you know you've learned so much, but still feel as though you know so little.

**Have fun and be positive** - Above all else I think this is the most important aspect of growth mindset coaching. Laugh at your mistakes, then figure out how to fix them and do it better. There will be times when you'll laugh because something happened that was funny and there will be times when laughing will be the only thing you can do to keep from being angry and throwing your hands up and quitting. Develop a soft, easy going nature, and remember that you LOVE what you do and it should be evident in your personality and your coaching.