

## Providing feedback to learners: Drawing on the mindset perspective

### Introduction

In this article we outline the foundations of the *mindset perspective*\* and the key considerations for outdoor professionals when providing feedback to learners. There has been much interest within the education sector in recent years around the work of Carol Dweck and her concept of *mindsets* in relation to an individual's motivation and behaviour, especially in the classroom environment<sup>1</sup>. However, the mindset perspective is relevant to all education settings, including those in the outdoor sector. In particular, Dweck's work can be used to support the way in which we communicate with learners to promote positive learning experiences.

### What are mindsets?

An individual's mindset refers to their view about whether or not their human attributes and behaviours can change (e.g., morality, intelligence, physical ability, etc.). That is, the different views that a learner has about the attribute or behaviour creates different frameworks through which they attempt to organise their experiences and understand their world (i.e., a lens through which they view and judge their achievements and disappointments)<sup>2</sup>. Through viewing the attribute or behaviour as either malleable or stable, this 'meaning system' can have a profound effect on a learner's behaviour, motivation, and learning. The mindset that a learner adopts will determine: how they respond to outcomes of tasks; how they approach challenges and tasks; what they value in the learning setting; their interpretation of their effort; their self-esteem; the reasons they give for their successes and failures; and the goals on which they choose to focus<sup>2</sup>.

Within Dweck's mindset perspective, two mindsets named the *growth* and *fixed mindsets*\*\* have been identified that influence a learner's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. An individual that adopts a growth mindset views their attributes and behaviours as changeable and controllable qualities that can be developed over time. Whereas an individual that adopts a fixed mindset views their attributes and behaviours as fixed and stable quantities which cannot be developed<sup>2</sup>.

A learner has access to both mindsets, but one is usually more dominant at any moment in time, and this may be due to the learning environment, feedback, and interactions with the coach, leader, or guide. The differences in the two mindsets are most obvious when the learner is experiencing challenges or setbacks in their learning<sup>2</sup>. There is overwhelming evidence that a growth mindset is desirable as it is associated with a variety of positive outcomes for the learner (e.g., enjoyment, persistence, willingness to seek out challenges, and high levels of optimism, happiness, confidence, performance, and learning)<sup>3</sup>. This is in contrast to when a learner adopts a fixed mindset; they typically experience frustration, high levels of anxiety, avoidance of challenges, and low levels of enjoyment, persistence, performance, and learning<sup>3</sup>. Table 1 highlights some of the key differences associated with each mindset.

Table 1: Learner characteristics of growth and fixed mindsets<sup>4</sup>

	Learner characteristics	
	Growth	Fixed

What is their view of the nature of physical ability?	Malleable, controllable quality that can be cultivated through learning.	Fixed, stable quantity that cannot be improved.
What do they value and how does this affect the goals they adopt in sessions?	Learning, hard work and effort. Tend to adopt goals that focus on self-improvement and mastery of tasks or not doing worse than they have done before.	Outperforming and being better than others. Tend to adopt goals that focus on being the best and doing better than others or not being worse than others.
What behaviours do they exhibit and what choices do they make in sessions?	Exhibit persistence, prefer challenging tasks, willing to take risks in their learning to develop and improve.	Give up easily, prefer easy, low effort tasks, and are unwilling to take risks in their learning.
How do they view effort?	Effort is the key to self-esteem and achievement.	Effort is something to be avoided since it implies low ability and results in lower self-esteem.
When do they feel good about themselves?	When fully engaging in a task, when using their skills and effort to master a task, or when working hard and stretching their abilities.	When they avoid looking incompetent, they succeed with low effort, they have an easy success, or others fail at a task they can do.
Is confidence needed to approach challenging tasks and what type?	Not necessarily needed. If it is present it is in relation to their ability to learn and master tasks and skills if they apply their strategies and effort.	Needed. Need to feel confident that they have high ability, that they are better than others or that they are already good at the task.
How do they view mistakes?	As an expected part of the learning process and that they are a cue to invest more effort and new strategies in order to succeed in the future. Mistakes/failures are attributed to the skills and strategies they employed.	As a measure of their ability and that they are not good enough. Mistakes/failures are attributed to their ability.
How do they view feedback?	Sought out by learners and valued for improving skills and future learning.	Want normative, ability-relevant feedback, disagree with learning-relevant feedback.

### **Practical considerations for outdoor professionals when providing feedback**

Communicating with learners in outdoor settings is vital and the feedback we provide to learners should be as effective as it possibly can be in terms of achieving maximum learning gains. Therefore, in relation to mindsets, the following factors should be considered:

#### **1) Avoid overpraising effort**

When providing feedback to learners in outdoor settings it is important to praise the strategies that they have used, the resilience they have demonstrated, or the effort they have invested in learning a technique or skill when this has led to success (known as *process praise*). However, we should not rely solely on praising effort as the means to

achieve process praise, a common misconception by some individuals in attempting to develop a growth mindset in learners. Praising effort is important when it is appropriate to do so; that is, when 'effort' is the reason that has led to the success in a task or the development of a skill (i.e., effort praise must be accompanied by some kind of improvement or learning gain). Continuing to praise effort when no improvement or learning has occurred is problematic for many reasons, not least that the learner may become demotivated with the activity. This should signal to the outdoor professional that a change or amendment to the task or challenge is required (i.e., perhaps the activity needs to be made easier through differentiation), or that the feedback being provided is not focussing on an appropriate aspect (i.e., strategy or resilience could be the focus of the feedback rather than effort).<sup>4</sup>

**2) Provide different forms of effort feedback in the different stages of learning**

While effort feedback is useful as part of a package of process praise to support the development of a growth mindset, it is important to be aware that effort feedback should consider the development of the learner's motor skills and competence in the activity. A part of the learning process necessitates that learner's will develop an economy of effort in the production of their motor skills and performance. Effort feedback, therefore, needs to be tailored to the different phases of learning<sup>5</sup>. For example, in the cognitive phase of learning (early stage) effort feedback would be focused on the persistence to practice and develop skills in the face of challenges, working out how to perform the skill, and to engage in trial-and-error learning. While in the associative phase of learning (middle stage), effort feedback would focus on the effort needed to continue to refine skills when improvement gains might be small. Whereas in the autonomous phase (final stage), where proficiency of motor skill development is achieved, learners will require effort feedback to encourage them to engage with and refine their skills in a variety of different situations. Generic effort feedback to 'keep trying' would be of limited benefit to learner's, particularly those in the latter stages of motor skill development, and would do little to develop a growth mindset<sup>4</sup>.

**3) Avoid using fixed mindset phrases**

Fixed mindset phrases, such as "oh wow, you did that quickly" or "you're a natural at this", are often well-intended by outdoor professionals but should be avoided if possible, or at least not overused, as they can lead to motivational problems for learners in the future. While these kinds of statements are often used to encourage an individual to keep trying or enhance their self-esteem, they can be misguided especially when situations arise where the learner has not tried but has succeeded and knows it was because the task was too easy. In these circumstances, the real reason for the success has been overlooked (i.e., the difficulty of the task)<sup>4</sup>.

**4) Encourage learners to value failure as part of the learning process**

Creating a learning environment where failure (i.e., making mistakes and being disappointed) is seen as a natural part of the learning process should be sought after and encouraged. Not attaching failure to a learner's own self-worth during feedback is important as it will allow them to seek out challenges more readily in the future; ultimately, supporting their long-term learning. This is because learners with a fixed mindset tend to avoid circumstances where they might fail, as they perceive 'the failure' (at the task or activity) as an indication that 'they are not good enough' and will never be good enough due to their 'fixed' level of ability<sup>4</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

Mindsets provide an interesting insight into the motivation of learners and the way in which they view the opportunities and experiences provided by coaches, leaders, and guides in outdoor settings. They are one perspective that outdoor professionals can utilise when providing feedback which can have a significant effect on learning. Communicating with learners in a way that promotes and develops a growth mindset will support the development of positive behaviours (e.g., persistence, engagement, curiosity, interaction, willingness, and seeking out challenges) and is likely to lead to positive feelings and experiences (e.g., enjoyment, happiness, confidence, learning, and performance) that encourage future participation and engagement in outdoor activities.

\*Mindsets (mindset perspective) are also known within the psychology literature as *Implicit Theories of Ability*

\*\*Within the psychology literature, a growth mindset is also known as an *incremental belief* and a fixed mindset is known as an *entity belief*

## References

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