



HIGH PERFORMING PEOPLE
OPENNESS TO LEARNING

How to use this resource

We are really pleased to provide you with this resource on the topic of Openness to Learning.

It sits as part of the **High Performing People Framework** and aims to provide some useful information on one of the framework's 13 identified characteristics. A resource will be available for each characteristic.

The recommendation is to use this resource to help you to understand the key theories that underpin Openness to Learning and to provide you with practical recommendations as to how to apply the theories.

The resource isn't designed to be directly used by athletes, but instead to be used by the coach, to think about how the information might be best applied with the specific group you coach based on their age, experience, and unique characteristics. If you have access to a performance psychologist, then involving them in the conversation would be beneficial.

Enjoy the resource and we hope it stimulates some new ideas and, most importantly, actions.

Jonathan Smith BSc; MSc; PhD

Performance Psychologist - Olympic Sprint and Paracanoe



[Click to read about the High Performing People framework](#)



“Openness to learning is the belief that our abilities are malleable if we put in more effort, learn new strategies, apply feedback and challenge ourselves.”

Openness to learning = abilities are malleable

Openness to learning = effort can lead to better results

Openness to learning = learning new strategies can lead to better results

Openness to learning = seeking feedback

Openness to learning = challenging ourselves to move to the boundaries of our comfort

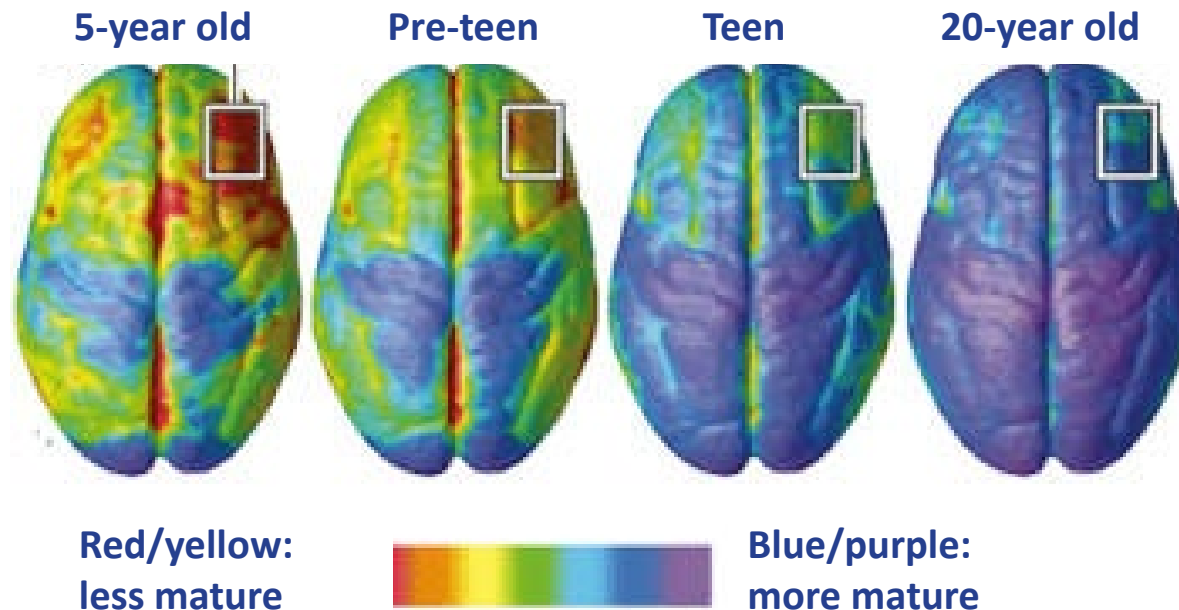
Brain plasticity

Science once told us that the human brain stops developing in childhood, however, we now know that the brain is constantly evolving and changing.

Recent advances in Neuroscience have shown us that the brain is far more malleable than we ever knew. Research on brain plasticity has shown how connectivity between neurons can change with experience.

With practice, neural networks grow new connections, strengthen existing ones, and build insulation that speeds the transmission of impulses.

This means that we can increase our neural growth through actions such as using good strategies, asking questions, practicing, and following good nutrition and sleep habits.

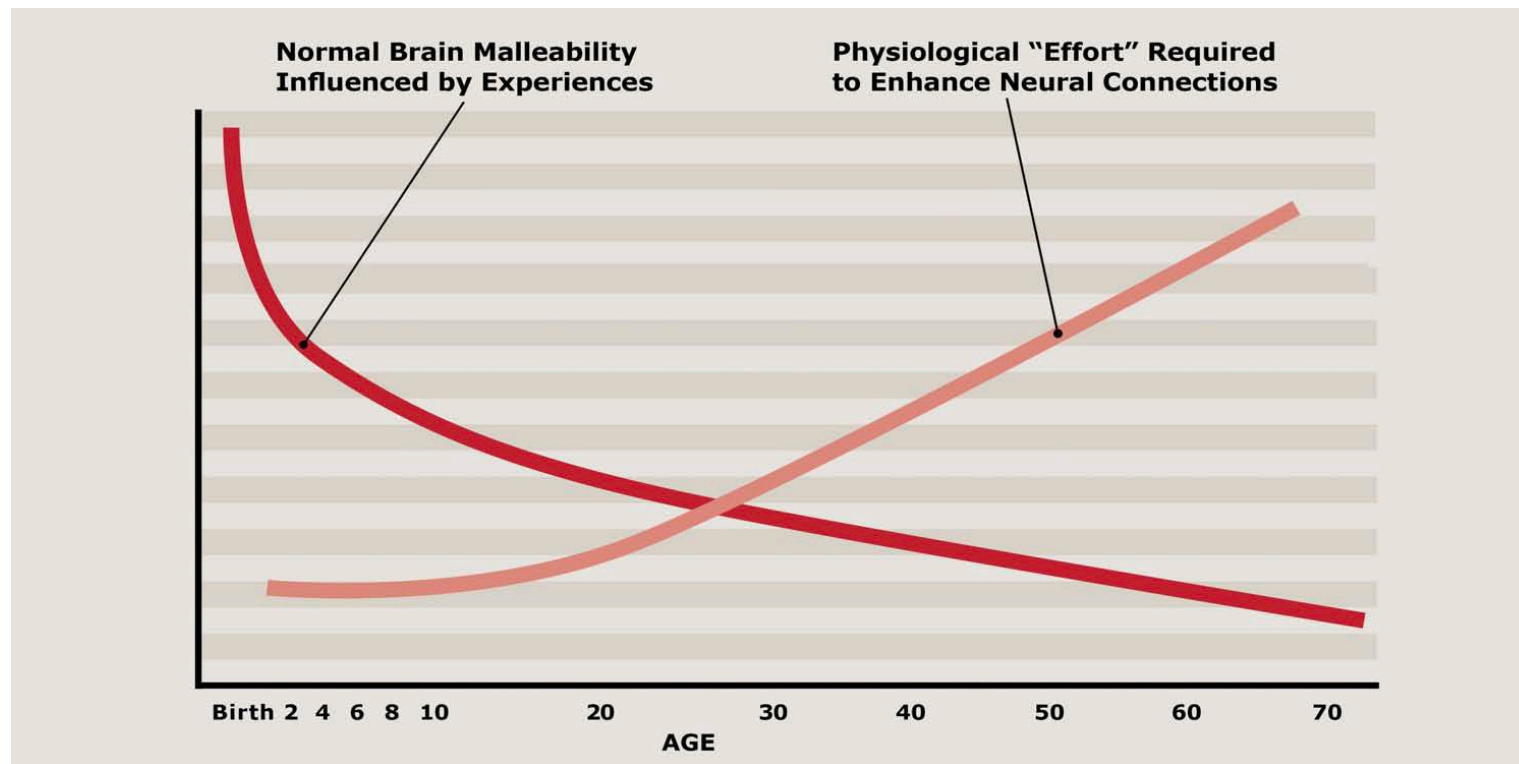


Brain plasticity

At the same time, researchers have been discovering the link between mindsets and achievement. It turns out that if you believe your brain can grow/develop, you behave differently.

This was the beginning of the work by Carol Dweck and colleagues around, what she termed, a growth mindset.

Despite the neurological facts, some people still think that you're stuck with the talents and 'smarts' you're born with.



Growth mindset

A Growth Mindset describes the underlying belief that people have about learning and intelligence. When people believe that they can get smarter/better, they understand that effort makes them stronger. Therefore, they put in extra time and effort, and that leads to higher achievement.

Carol Dweck suggested that the individual's mindset sets the stage for either performance goals or learning goals.

A person with a performance goal might be worried about looking good all the time and avoiding challenging work. On the other hand, a person with a learning goal will pursue interesting and challenging tasks in order to learn more.



Growth mindset

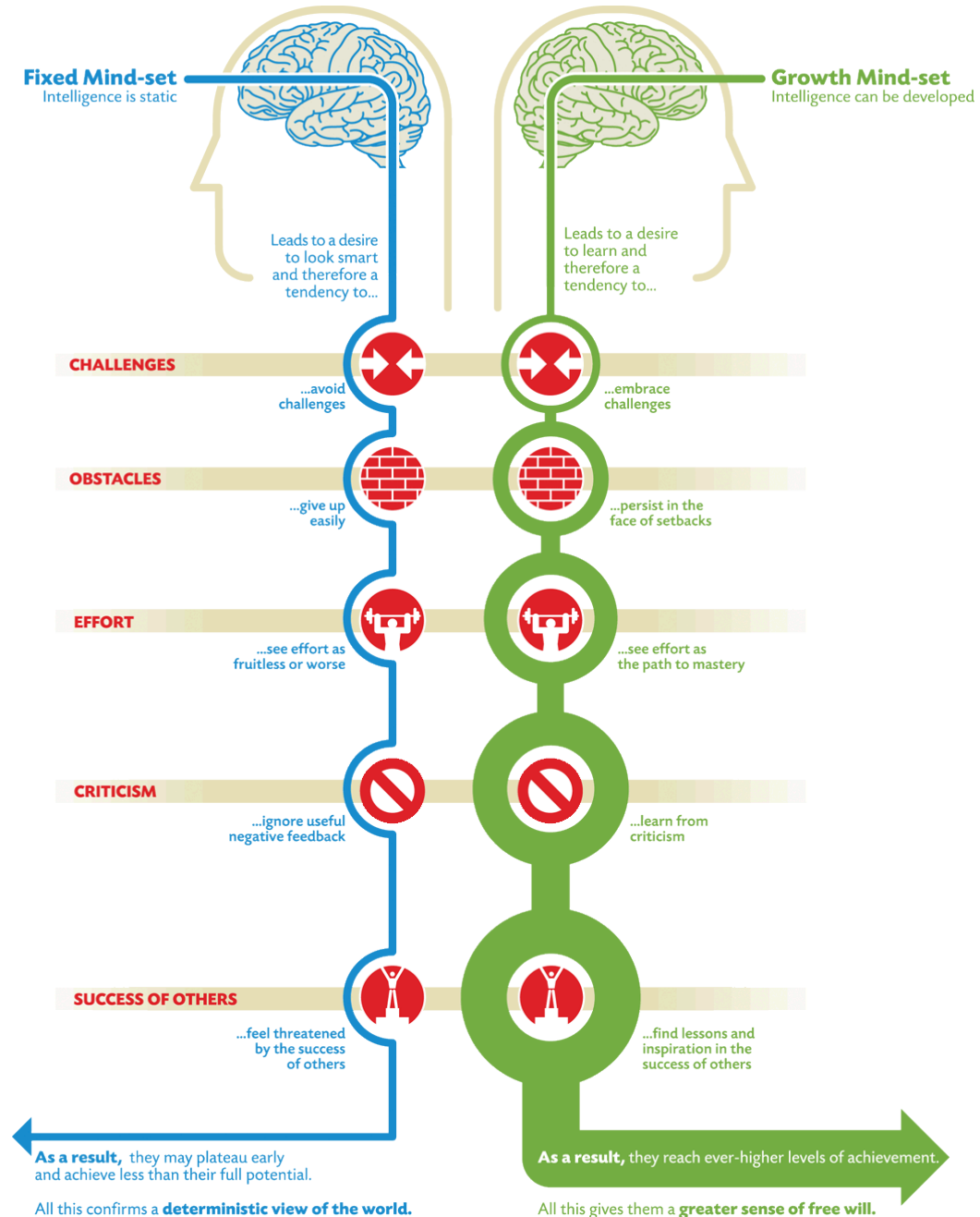
In later studies, Dr. Dweck found that people who believe their abilities are malleable are more likely to embrace challenges and persist despite failure.

This model of the fixed vs growth mindset shows how cognitive, affective, and behavioural features are linked to one's beliefs about the malleability of their intelligence.

A growth mindset is where you believe your ability and talent can be developed over time through effort, good coaching, and persistence compared to a fixed mindset where you believe that ability is fixed – so if you're not good at something, you might believe you'll never be good at it.

A fixed-minded person usually avoids challenges in life, gives up easily, and becomes intimidated or threatened by the success of other people.

This is in part because a fixed mindset doesn't see intelligence and talent as something you develop—it's something you "are".



Developing a growth mindset

1. REALISE THAT, SCIENTIFICALLY, YOU CAN IMPROVE

One of the most direct methods of fostering a growth mindset is helping the athlete understand that brains are built to grow and learn.

By challenging themselves with new experiences, they can form or strengthen neural connections to 'rewire' their brain which, in turn, can make them better.

2. REMOVE THE 'FIXED MINDSET' INNER VOICE

Many people have a negative inner voice that acts against a growth mindset.

Try to help them to flip their thoughts such as 'I can't do this, to 'I can do this if I keep practising' to nurture a growth mindset.

3. REWARD THE PROCESS

Although society often rewards those who achieve excellent outcomes, this can work against a growth mindset.

Instead, reward the process and the effort exerted. One study by Dr Carol Dweck showed that rewarding effort over results on a maths game improved performance.



Developing a growth mindset

4. GET FEEDBACK

Try to encourage them to seek feedback on their work. When athletes are provided with progressive feedback about what they did well and where they can improve, it creates motivation to keep going.

Feedback is also associated with a pleasurable dopamine response and enhances a growth mindset.

5. GET OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE

Encourage them to be brave enough to leave their comfort zone to help foster a growth mindset.

When faced with a challenge, try to encourage them to choose the harder option that will allow them to grow.

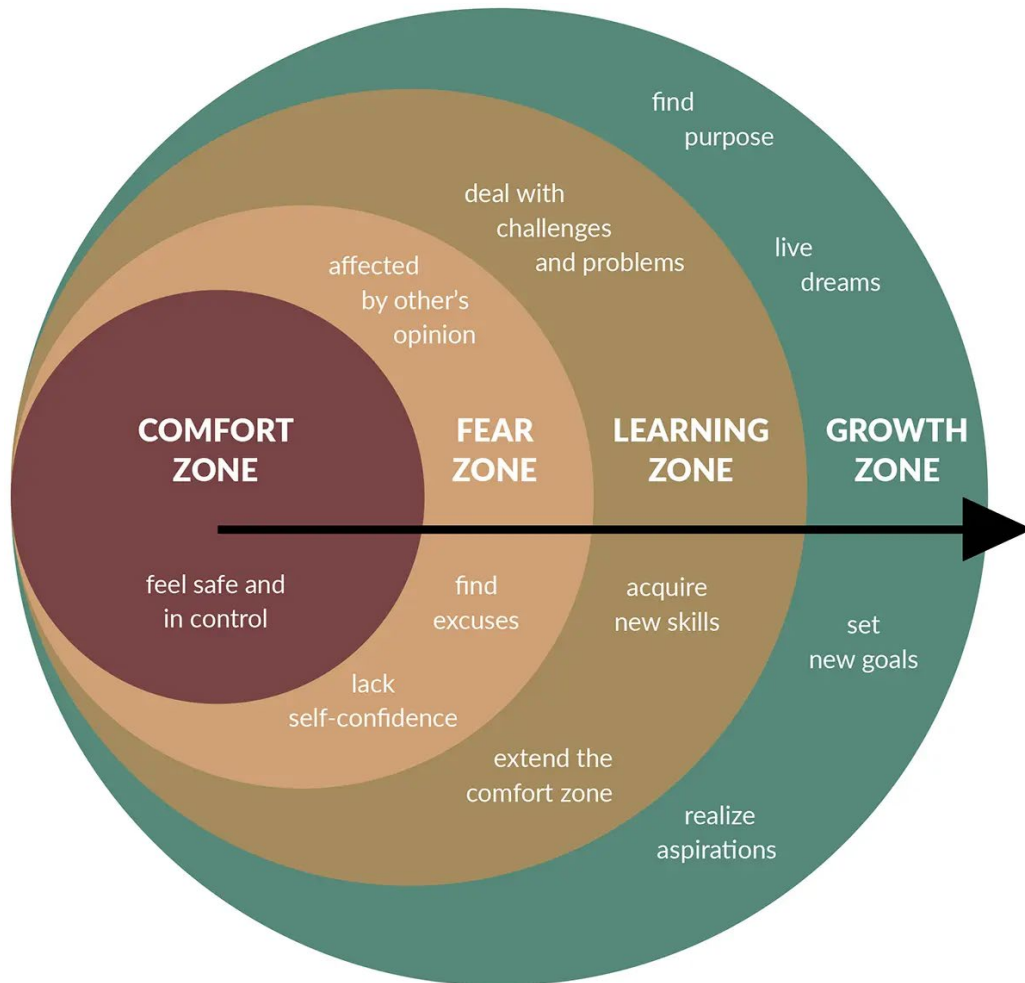
6. ACCEPT FAILURE AS PART OF THE PROCESS

Failure, setbacks, and initial confusion are all part of the learning process!

When trying something new, see occasional 'failures' as positive learning opportunities; help them to try to enjoy the discovery process along the way.



Challenge



To enable growth and development, an athlete will be required to move outside of what they are comfortable at doing (comfort zone).

This comfort zone is a behavioural state where a person operates in an anxiety-neutral condition, where they are able to deliver a steady level of performance, usually without a sense of risk.

Within the comfort zone, people aren't challenging themselves to reach new heights of performance. It's here that people go about routines devoid of risk, causing progress to plateau.

When leaving the comfort zone, we step into the unknown where we are unsure about what might happen and we let go of some of the control we have of the outcome.

People might experience some fear at this point, but this can be a necessary step to the learning and growth zone. It takes courage to step out of the comfort zone.

Without a clear roadmap, there's no way to build on previous experiences and you are looking for new ways of doing things which can be anxiety provoking.

Challenge

Persevere long enough, and you enter the learning zone, where you gain new skills and deal with challenges resourcefully.

After a learning period, a new comfort zone is created, expanding one's ability to reach even greater heights. This is what it means to be in the growth zone.

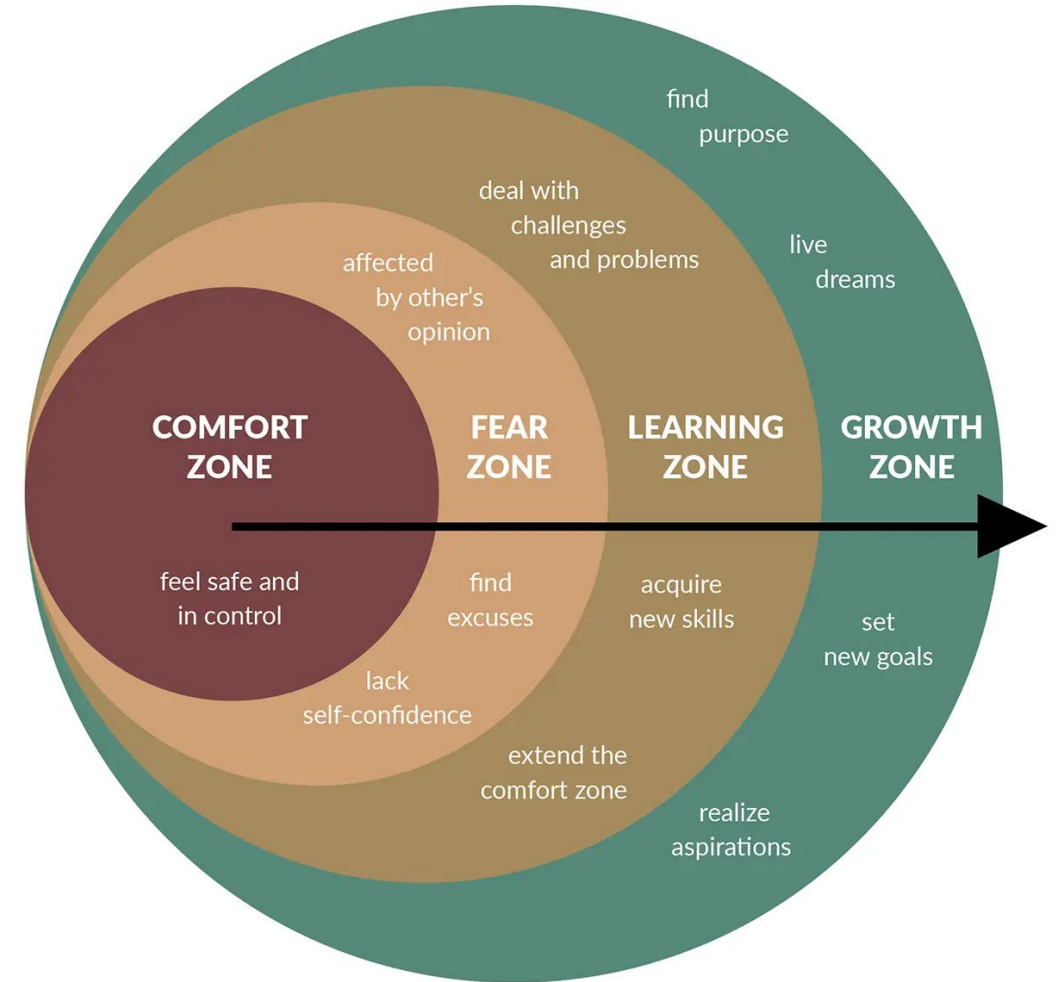
In reality, the process of moving from the comfort zone to a growth zone may not be linear. Peaks, troughs, and plateaus often complicate the journey.

Sometimes, we even need to retreat to the comfort zone periodically before mustering the strength to leave again.

Nevertheless, appreciating the steps can help in tolerating uncertainty.

While occupying the comfort zone, it's tempting to feel safe, in control, and that the environment is on an even keel. It's smooth sailing.

The best sailors, however, aren't born in smooth waters.



Feedback

Feedback is one of the fastest ways to focus our efforts, correct our course, and achieve our goals.

Receiving feedback and putting it into action is especially important in order to grow. None of us are perfect, and we all have blind spots. It can sometimes be tough to handle, especially if it's detailed feedback from a coach or another athlete with whom you have been working with for a while.

Those who can gracefully receive feedback and put it into practice are more likely to get the benefit of the doubt. The extra attention to their training can make the difference between good and great performance.

While the idea of feedback may seem simple, our emotions and ego can often get in the way, making it more complicated. Being deliberate in asking for feedback and being in the right headspace to receive it is key to the feedback process.

When you know how to receive feedback, it results in honest, thoughtful comments and follow-through. You can also take constructive criticism and turn it into an opportunity for professional development.

Let's take a look at how to ask for feedback, what makes it valuable, and how to give actionable feedback to others.



Asking for feedback

Feedback can be intimidating. Feedback is often understood as backward-looking and when we ask for feedback from people, we are also choosing people based on their experience working with us.

With our athletes it is useful to help reinforce these key messages.

1. REFLECT ON WHAT THEY HOPE TO GAIN

Help them to know the goal in asking for feedback.

Most of the time, their goal will be to gain an accurate picture of what they're doing well and where they can improve.

The goal is to walk away with actionable takeaways that you can implement.

They know feedback is valuable when they have a clear sense of something they will do differently.

Productive feedback allows them to grow. It also allows them to recognise their strengths.

2. IDENTIFY THE RIGHT PEOPLE TO ASK FOR FEEDBACK

Get them to consider whom to turn to for advice, above all else, consider the source.

Athletes should only ask for feedback from people whose intentions they trust and who will have a relevant perspective.

To get a well-rounded perspective, consult different people, they'll benefit from seeing themselves from more than one angle.

3. SPEND SOME TIME REFLECTING

Whether there are areas where they often struggle or where they sense there might be a disconnect.

Asking for a specific example, or saying "Can you tell me more about that?" Let the person giving feedback know that you really want to understand their perspective.

Receiving feedback

Receiving feedback can sometimes be difficult. Here are a few suggestions to help your athletes enhance their ability to use the feedback they receive.

1. TAKE NOTES ON YOUR FEEDBACK

Feedback is a gift. Just as important as seeking feedback is hearing advice with an open mind and a desire to implement it.

Remember that feedback is an opportunity to understand how others perceive you and your work. Help them recognise that they don't have to agree with it, but knowing others' perspectives is more useful than not knowing.

Put themselves in the other person's shoes and keep in mind that it can be just as hard to be the person giving the feedback. Try to help them to put their ego aside & accept advice with a positive attitude.

2. GRACIOUSLY REFLECT & REVIEW

Get the athletes to think about what they'll do with the feedback after they've received it. Organise the feedback so that they can refer back to it. Make a step-by-step plan that outlines how they'll implement the feedback in tangible ways.

Consider sharing that plan back with at least some of the people who gave it. Receiving input isn't always easy, especially if you don't like or agree with it.



Receiving feedback

3. BE WILLING TO ACCEPT INFORMATION WITH A POSITIVE, OPEN MIND

Feedback is about someone else's perception — in this case, perception is reality.

The athlete's default may be denial or defensiveness to someone else's views. Help them to understand the situation from the perspective of the feedback provider. Understand that they are most likely giving that feedback with positive intent.

That is, they believe that they are giving helpful feedback that will result in a positive change to your behaviour.

It can be useful for them to keep in mind that becoming defensive when a professional gives them advice will not work in their favour. They'll be far less likely to receive honest responses in the future.

Remind them that feedback on performance isn't personal. Receive the comments pragmatically instead of emotionally.

4. ADOPT A GROWTH MINDSET

Although difficult, feedback is a positive asset that will help them to improve and achieve their goals.

The opposite of a growth mindset is one that's fixed. A fixed mindset views feedback as an attack on self-worth.

Remember that any negative feedback about their performance is all part of the process. Be thankful that the feedback reveals potential blind spots that could prevent them from reaching their full potential.

5. BE NON-JUDGEMENTAL

Release any judgments or preconceived notions of the person giving the feedback. Assume that the advice-giver has good intentions.

Assuming the best creates a neutral environment for a peaceful and productive exchange to take place.

Receiving feedback

6. BE VULNERABLE

They may learn something new during feedback — that's why they've asked for it.

But don't be afraid to allow them to express their feelings. The best way to avoid misunderstandings is to ask clarifying questions.

Encourage them to, when in doubt, simply respond, "Thank you for sharing that with me." They're allowed to have authentic reactions.

But keeping them professional and appropriate will ensure that they continue to get useful feedback in the future.

No one wants to take the effort and risk of providing honest feedback if the receiver is defensive, dismissive, argumentative, or overly emotional.

7. SEPARATE PERFORMANCE FROM IDENTITY

It bears repeating that teammate or coach feedback is about the athletic performance, not about them as a person.

It can be hard at first, but reminding themselves of this helps them not to take criticism personally.

If, at any point during the conversation, they feel belittled or humiliated, give them a moment to distance themselves and take control of their emotions.

If necessary, coach them to be honest and say, "I'm going to need some more time to process that one. Let's move on for now."

They can follow up later via email or another conversation if they feel the difficult feedback warrants more exploration.



Resources

- **Mindset**
by Carol Dweck
- **How the brain learns**
by David Sousa

YOUTUBE

- **Growth Mindset vs Fixed mindset**
- **The Growth Mindset | Carol Dweck | Talks at Google**
- **Growth Mindset of Athletic Ability**