

# Building an Ensemble of Growth

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When we look at successful people, we often wonder, how did they create their success? How did they persevere through adversity despite their failures? There are many possible explanations, but I am of the belief that it is because of their mindset. These greats believed that with enough work they could grow and achieve, and that mindset fueled their drive and success.

This idea of a mindset comes from the work of psychologist Carol Dweck.<sup>1</sup> Her research focuses on the link between your belief in abilities and intelligence and your performance through adversity. Mindset exists on a spectrum where one side is a "fixed" mindset or belief that abilities and intelligence cannot be significantly developed. The other side is a "growth" mindset or belief that abili-

ties and intelligence can be developed with effort, learning, and dedication. Dweck's research contends that students with a growth mindset have better intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, and perseverance. By believing that effort can develop their abilities, students are more apt to grow and achieve success in their education and overall lives.

As stated earlier, mindset exists on a spectrum, so you cannot have either a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. In addition, your mindset is changeable, and it shifts based on your experience. With the right conditions, it is possible to foster a growth mindset environment in your ensemble, and creating this environment has considerable benefits. In this article I will share steps I have taken to facilitate an ensemble of growth and develop students with a greater growth mindset.

## 1. Prove it. Where's the evidence?

At the beginning of the school year, I give a lesson on the human brain and how our brains learn. Inadvertently, there are always comments like "Why are we learning this?" and, "This is not biology class!" As we progress through the lesson, the students realize how this is applicable to learning any subject. We talk about brain plasticity



and how our neural pathways expand and strengthen the more times we engage in an activity. For the students who have difficulty comprehending, I use the simple analogy of walking through a forest.

If you happen upon a wild forest and you decide to walk through it for the first time, it is tough. There are branches and bushes blocking your way, and there is no easy trail to walk along. But if you walk the same path every day for thirty days, you start to create a track, and each day the walk becomes easier. This is how our body works when we begin a new activity or learn something new. Our neural pathways from our body up to our brain start narrow and weak. However, the more times we do an activity, the pathways will strengthen, and the activity becomes easier.

Another example is a study that looks at the differences between the brains of individuals born with auditory impairments and the brains of individuals without auditory impairments.<sup>2</sup> The study is an example of how our brain changes depending on the activities we engage in. Through brain scans, scientists have found significant increases in the visual cortex of auditory-impaired individuals compared to non-auditory-impaired individuals. Because of the auditory impairments in the deaf individuals, their bodies rely more on sight and build stronger visual neural pathways. As a result, the visual cortex grows as an accommodation for increased sight reliance. Seeing this research provides evidence to our students that our brains adapt and grow depending on the activities we continually engage in.

Understanding our brain and how our body learns is crucial to building an environment of growth. This understanding facilitates the belief that you can learn and change by continually working at it, and that belief fuels things like intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, and perseverance. As you start to build your environment of growth, give your students reasons to believe they can learn. That belief can become reality.

## **2. Create goals to grow toward**

After showing how our brains learn, we need to create goals to work and grow toward. One effective way to craft goals is using the S.M.A.R.T. acronym, which was created in the business world.<sup>3</sup> S.M.A.R.T. stands for specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and timebound. A goal is more likely to be achieved when it is crafted with these five items in mind. For example, a goal of increasing breath capac-

ity: I will increase my breath capacity by tracking how long I can hiss an air stream every day, and I aim to increase the length by five seconds in one month's time. Creating a goal that addresses all five S.M.A.R.T. items requires great specificity, but it gives a clear objective and is easily assessed for achievement.

Furthermore, in my ensembles I break down goals into two categories: broad ensemble goals and specific individuals goals. When creating ensemble goals, a great starting place is the state or national music standards. Sometimes the standard may be quite broad, so this can be broken down into more specific goals that lead to the overall standard. For example, a common state standard for a vocal class is to develop proper vocal technique. Since proper technique requires so many different aspects, you can break it down into multiple specific objectives like engage in proper alignment or demonstrate active breath support to address each aspect. In addition, some ensemble goals should be made in collaboration with your students. These ensemble goals can address what the group wants to achieve during the year. This provides group objectives for everyone to work toward, and it helps bring an ensemble together.

Individual goals make up the other side to goal setting. It is important to have individual goals in order to track individual progress, and individual improvement will translate into improvement of the entire ensemble. In order to create effective individual goals, an element of individual instruction is needed. One way is to provide quick individual lessons, which I named "Vocal Check-ins" in my classroom. These are done multiple times a year typically during the downtime after a concert or at the end of a quarter grading period.

During these vocal check-ins, I meet with each student and see how they are progressing vocally. This time allows me to hear the student's individual voice, assess any vocal issues, and clarify concepts that the student may have been struggling with. From this individual lesson, the student and I then craft specific individual goals for them to work on. Having these goals in place provides an objective to strive for, and growth becomes a product of our progress toward these individual and ensemble goals.

## **3. Put in the work**

Now that we have goals in place, it is time to put in the work. Professional athletes refer to this as "the grind,"

where you continually work on your craft. During this time, it may be difficult to motivate your students and you may hear phrases like, “Do we have to warm-up today?” and “Why do we need to do this again?” These moments can be difficult to navigate, but reminders about how we learn and improve can help.

Another helpful practice during this time is to differentiate or change up how you work toward your goals. In this day in age where attention spans are shorter and stimuli are changing at ever faster rates, we can find more success by changing how we present the exact same information. For example, using a variety of warm-ups that work on the same concept instead of the exact same exercises each day. Or, you can use different activities and games to work on interval skills instead of purely constant repetition. This approach of changing up our instruction and routines is helpful especially when working with students who have difficulty with focus. Not all students have the personality to “grind it out,” so we can help them with how we present our material.

#### 4. Evaluate execution and provide feedback

Feedback is the way students adjust to achieve proper execution, and how we present feedback can facilitate or hinder growth. Just like in stage three, feedback differentiation is useful for greater student understanding. By explaining something in multiple ways, students have more opportunities to understand the feedback, which helps with engagement. For example, using a kinesthetic or vocal modeling to achieve the desired sound instead of only verbalizing the feedback. Often, an ensemble will fix an issue faster with a simple kinesthetic instead of a verbal explanation.

Additionally, feedback can only lead to growth if the ensemble is given the opportunity to execute the feedback. Sometimes teachers will give feedback but then immediately move on to something else. When this happens, students are not given a chance to be correct, and then proper execution is never experienced or ingrained. An effective way to ingrain proper execution is to have the students correctly execute their task, praise their success, and then have them execute it correctly multiple times in quick succession. This builds muscle memory and leads to more consistent and retainable improvement.

Furthermore, the type of feedback we give can encourage or discourage growth. In *The Growth Mindset Coach*, these

types of feedback are labeled as “person” and “process” feedback.<sup>4</sup> With person feedback, praise or critique focuses on a student’s personal traits and qualities, and it conveys the message that the student succeeded because of inherent qualities. For example, the phrase, “You’re a natural musician.” On the other hand, process feedback acknowledges effort, strategies, or actions that contribute to success. This conveys the message that the student succeeded because of the amount of effort put in. For example, “Great job! Your solo at the concert was amazing because of all the work you put in.”

With these two types of feedback, process feedback does more to encourage growth, while person feedback can actually discourage growth. This is especially true with negative feedback and failure. Take, for example, the sentence, “You aren’t singing in tune possibly because your ear is tone deaf.” When someone gives negative person feedback, that failure becomes the result of innate lack of ability. Since person feedback implies abilities are naturally born, there is little hope to overcome the failure and improve because you cannot change your abilities. To really encourage growth and overcoming challenges, we need to celebrate the effort. With more process feedback, effort becomes a positive and allows students to believe success is in their hands.

#### 5. Self-assessment:

##### Where am I and where do I want to be?

The last item is a review of the previously executed tasks in relation to the created goals. This can be done in different ways depending on how much time you have. If you are under time constraints, a quick self-assessment can be done with a number rating system. In my class, I will occasionally display a class objective we have been working on. I then have the students show how comfortable they are with the objective by showing a number from one to five. This is a fast way for the students to analyze their progress and a way to see who feels like they are excelling and who may need more help. Based on this information, you then have the option of breaking into pairs and using a mentoring strategy. This is where you have the students who understand the concepts well help and mentor those who are less comfortable with the concepts.

Another self-assessment is a written self-reflection. I typically have the class do this in conjunction with the vocal check-in mentioned above. While I am working with






an individual student, the rest of the class is analyzing their progress. I ask them to name positives and negatives in regards to their progress, how they achieved or did not achieve their goals, and specific actions they can take in their next step. Self-reflection can be daunting for some students because of all the internal analysis. Often the students are not specific enough and this is necessary in order for the self-reflection to be effective. Three simple questions offer an easy way for students to consider their progress:

- Where am I?
- Where do I want to be?
- What do I need to do to get there?

If a student is ever stuck on their self-reflection, have them start there and see what they come up with.

### Conclusion

These steps are in no way a guarantee for a perfect growth environment, but they are ways I have found success in my teaching. Our students need to believe in the power of effort to produce growth, and they need us as their teachers to believe in them. If we can teach them the importance of effort and cultivate their growth mindset, we can help them achieve the byproduct of a lifetime of success. 

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Natasha Leporé, et al., “Mapping of Brain Differences in Native Signing Congenitally and Prelingually Deaf Subjects.” *Hum Brain Mapp* 970-978 (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Doug Thorpe, “Be SMART About Your Goal Setting.” February 8, 2023. Accessed June 28, 2023. <https://doughthorpe.com/be-smart-about-your-goal-setting/>.

<sup>4</sup> Annie Brock and Heather Hundley, *The Growth Mindset Coach* (Berkeley, CA: Ulysses Press, 2016).