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5 Characteristics Of Grit -- How Many Do You Have?



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Recently some close friends visited, both of whom have worked in education with adolescents for over 40 years. We were talking about students in general and when I asked what has changed with regards to the character of kids, in unison they said "grit" – or more specifically, lack thereof. There seems to be growing concern among teachers that kids these days are growing soft.

When I took a deeper dive, I found that what my friends have been observing in-the-field, researchers have been measuring in the lab. The role grit plays in success has become a topic du jour, spearheaded by [Angela Duckworth](#), who was catapulted to the forefront of the field after delivering a [TED talk](#) which has since been viewed well over a million times.

Additionally, in the last month, Duckworth received a \$650,000 MacArthur fellowship, otherwise known as the "Genius Grant," to continue her work.

And, while Duckworth has made tremendous leaps in the field, she stands on the shoulders of giants including William James, K.E Ericson, and Aristotle, who believed tenacity was one of the most valued virtues.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, grit in the context of behavior is defined as “firmness of character; indomitable spirit.” Duckworth, based on her studies, tweaked this definition to be “perseverance and passion for long-term goals.” While I recognize that she is the expert, I questioned her modification...in particular the “long-term goals” part. Some of the grittiest people I’ve known lack the luxury to consider the big picture and instead must react to immediate needs. This doesn’t diminish the value of their fortitude, but rather underscores that grit perhaps is more about attitude than an end game.

But Duckworth’s research is conducted in the context of *exceptional* performance and success in the traditional sense, so requires it be measured by test scores, degrees, and medals over an extended period of time. Specifically, she explores this question, talent and intelligence/ IQ being equal: why do some individuals accomplish more than others? It is that distinction which allows her the liberty to evolve the definition, but underscores the importance of defining her context.

The characteristics of grit outlined below include Duckworth’s findings as well as some that defy measurement. Duckworth herself is the first to say that the essence of grit remains elusive. It has hundreds of correlates, with nuances and anomalies, and your level depends on the expression of their interaction at any given point. Sometimes it is stronger, sometimes weaker, but the constancy of your tenacity is based on the degree to which you can access, ignite, and control it. So here are a few of the more salient characteristics to see how you measure up.

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Courage

While courage is hard to measure, it is directly proportional to your level of grit. More specifically, your ability to manage fear of failure is imperative and a predicator of success. The supremely gritty are not afraid to tank, but rather embrace it as part of a process. They understand that there are valuable lessons in defeat and that the vulnerability of perseverance is requisite for high achievement. Teddy Roosevelt, a Grand Sire of Grit, spoke about the importance of overcoming fear and managing vulnerability in an address he made at the Sorbonne in 1907. He stated:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strived valiantly; who errs, who comes again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.

Fear of failure, or atychiphobia as the medical-set calls it, can be a debilitating disorder, and is characterized by an unhealthy aversion to risk (or a strong resistance to embracing vulnerability). Some symptoms include

anxiety, mental blocks, and perfectionism and scientists ascribe it to genetics, brain chemistry, and life experiences. However, don't be alarmed... the problem is not insurmountable. On Amazon, a "fear of failure" search yields 28,879 results. And while there are millions of different manifestations and degrees of the affliction, a baseline antidote starts with listening to the words of Eleanor Roosevelt: "do something that scares you everyday." As I noted in a recent post, courage is like a muscle; it has to be exercised daily. If you do, it will grow; ignored, it will atrophy. Courage helps fuel grit; the two are symbiotic, feeding into and off of each other...and you need to manage each and how they are functioning together.

As a side note, some educators believe that the current trend of coddling our youth, by removing competition in sports for example, is preventing some kids from actually learning how to fail and to embrace it as an inevitable part of life. In our effort to protect our kids from disappointment are we inadvertently harming them? Coddling and cultivating courage may indeed turn out to be irreconcilable bedfellows. As with everything, perhaps the answer lies in the balance...more to come.

Conscientiousness: Achievement Oriented vs. Dependable

As you probably know, it is generally agreed that there are five core character traits from which all human personalities stem called... get this... The Big Five. They are: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness, and Neurotic. Each exists on a continuum with its opposite on the other end, and our personality is the expression of the dynamic interaction of each and all at any given time. One minute you may feel more agreeable, the next more neurotic, but fortunately, day-to-day, they collectively remain fairly stable for most of us.

According to Duckworth, of the five personality traits, conscientiousness is

the most closely associated with grit. However, it seems that there are two types, and how successful you will be depends on what type you are. Conscientiousness in this context means, careful and painstaking; meticulous. But in a 1992 study, the educator L.M. Hough found the definition to be far more nuanced when applied to tenacity. Hough's study distinguished achievement from the dependability aspects of conscientiousness.

The achievement-oriented individual is one who works tirelessly, tries to do a good job, and completes the task at hand, whereas the dependable person is more notably self-controlled and conventional. Not surprisingly, Hough discovered that achievement orientated traits predicted job proficiency and educational success far better than dependability. So a self-controlled person who may never step out of line may fail to reach the same heights as their more mercurial friends. In other words, in the context of conscientious, grit, and success, it is important to commit to go for the gold rather than just show up for practice. Or, to put it less delicately, it's better to be a racehorse than an ass.

Long-Term Goals and Endurance: Follow Through

As I wrote in the introduction, I had some reservations about accepting the difference between Webster's definition of grit and Duckworth's interpretation. Both have to do with perseverance, but the latter exists in the arena of extraordinary success and therefore requires a long-term time commitment. Well, since you are Forbes readers and destined for the pantheon of extraordinary success, it is important to concede that for you... long-term goals play an important role. Duckworth writes:

“... achievement is the product of talent and effort, the latter a function of the intensity, direction, and duration of one's exertions towards a long-term goal.”

Malcolm Gladwell agrees. In his 2007 best selling book Outliers, he examines the seminal conditions required for optimal success. We're talking about the best of the best... Beatles, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs. How did they build such impossibly powerful spheres of influence? Unfortunately, some of Gladwell's findings point to dumb luck. Still, the area where Gladwell and Duckworth intersect (and what we can actually control), is on the importance of goals and lots, and lots and lots of practice...10,000 hours to be precise.

Turns out the baseline time commitment required to become a contender, even if predisposed with seemingly prodigious talent, is at least 20 hours a week over 10 years. Gladwell's 10,000 hours theory and Duckworth's findings align to the hour. However, one of the distinctions between someone who succeeds and someone who is just spending a lot of time doing something is this: practice must have purpose. That's where long-term goals come in. They provide the context and framework in which to find the meaning and value of your long-term efforts, which helps cultivate drive, sustainability, passion, courage, stamina...grit.

Resilience: Optimism, Confidence, and Creativity

Of course, on your long haul to greatness you're going to stumble, and you will need to get back up on the proverbial horse. But what is it that gives you the strength to get up, wipe the dust off, and remount? Futurist and author Andrew Zolli says it's resilience. I'd have to agree with that one.

In Zolli's book, Resilience, Why Things Bounce Back, he defines resilience as "the ability of people, communities, and systems to maintain their core purpose and integrity among unforeseen shocks and surprises."

For Zolli, resilience is a dynamic combination of optimism, creativity, and confidence, which together empower one to reappraise situations and

regulate emotion – a behavior many social scientists refer to as “hardiness” or “grit.” Zolli takes it even further and explains that “hardiness” is comprised of three tenets: “ (1) the belief one can find meaningful purpose in life, (2) the belief that one can influence one’s surroundings and the outcome of events, and (3) the belief that positive and negative experiences will lead to learning and growth.”

Wait, what? Seems that there is a lot going on here, but this is my take on the situation in an elemental equation. Optimism + Confidence + Creativity = Resilience = Hardiness = (+/-)Grit. So, while a key component of grit is resilience, resilience is the powering mechanism that draws your head up, moves you forward, and helps you persevere despite whatever obstacles you face along the way. In other words, gritty people believe, “everything will be alright in the end, and if it is not alright, it is not the end.”

Excellence vs. Perfection

In general, gritty people don’t seek perfection, but instead strive for excellence. It may seem that these two have only subtle semantic distinctions; but in fact they are quite at odds. Perfection is excellence’s somewhat pernicious cousin. It is pedantic, binary, unforgiving and inflexible. Certainly there are times when “perfection” is necessary to establish standards, like in performance athletics such as diving and gymnastics. But in general, perfection is someone else’s perception of an ideal, and pursuing it is like chasing a hallucination. Anxiety, low self-esteem, obsessive compulsive disorder, substance abuse, and clinical depression are only a few of the conditions ascribed to “perfectionism.” To be clear, those are ominous barriers to success.

Excellence is an attitude, not an endgame. The word excellence is derived from the Greek word *Arête* which is bound with the notion of fulfillment of purpose or function and is closely associated with virtue. It is far more

forgiving, allowing and embracing failure and vulnerability on the ongoing quest for improvement. It allows for disappointment, and prioritizes progress over perfection. Like excellence, grit is an attitude about, to paraphrase Tennyson...seeking, striving, finding, and never yielding.

Are there any others you'd add? By definition, passion is critical, but what role do you think it plays? I am sure that Duckworth will continue to explore and share the distinctions in the years to come, but I'd love to hear your thoughts.

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