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The Importance of Grit

Skills and Professional Development



Today's legal leaders need to possess a number of skills that they don't teach in law school. One of these is "[grit](#)." Angela Duckworth, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, defines grit as "passion and perseverance for long-term goals."

In essence, grit enables highly successful people to stay motivated to succeed over long periods of time, despite setbacks and hardship. If you knock a gritty person down, they just get right back up again.

[As one study puts it:](#)

"Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina. While boredom signals to others that it is time to change trajectory, the gritty individual stays the course."

Grit is not the same thing as talent, which is how quickly you can improve upon a skill. Grit enables talent to blossom by driving the person to invest the time and effort needed to achieve success.

According to Duckworth, moving from talent to achievement can be summarised in two simple formulae:

talent × effort = skill

skill × effort = achievement

Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, Scribner (an imprint of Simon & Schuster Inc), 2016, p41.

Notice how effort counts both in acquiring skill and in achieving something substantive with that skill. As Duckworth notes:

“What this theory says is that when you consider individuals in identical circumstances, what each achieves depends on just two things, talent and effort. Talent — how fast we improve in skill — absolutely matters. But effort factors into the calculations twice, not once. Effort builds skills. At the very same time, effort makes skill productive.”

Ibid, p42.

Our culture has a tendency to focus on talent and intelligence over grit. However, when the chips are down and you are in the middle of a crisis, you definitely want to be surrounded by gritty people.

Some of the best lawyers out there achieved what they have achieved because they found ways to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Malcolm Gladwell, in his excellent book, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants*, recounts the story of the renowned litigator, David Boies, who has struggled with dyslexia. [As Gladwell has noted:](#)

“Here we have one of the greatest lawyers in the country, and he is profoundly dyslexic. He reads basically one book a year. He finds reading difficult and painful. Think about that for a moment, he’s a lawyer! He’s in a profession that has reading at its absolute core. When I talked to him, I said, ‘How did you become such a successful lawyer in spite of this disability?’ And he said, ‘not in spite, I became a successful lawyer because of this so-called disability.’ ... He learned how to listen, and he also developed an extraordinary memory. So he would sit in school, and he didn’t take notes, he sat and listened to the teacher and remembered everything that was said.”

One of the grittiest, and most successful lawyers I know personally is my mentee, [Haben Girma](#), a hugely successful disability rights activist and the first deaf-blind graduate of Harvard Law School. She has overcome a lifetime of challenges to succeed and, indeed, thrive despite her disability. Her hobbies include surfing and ballroom dancing.

While grit is related to self-control and conscientiousness, it is not the same thing. A conscientious and self-controlled person may be able to perform a short-term objective (e.g., a task at work), but buckle in the face of a challenging obstacle that stands in the way of a long-term objective.

Grit can, in fact, be measured. Duckworth has developed a “Grit Scale” that will determine the level of grittiness in a person, based on their agreement or disagreement (ranging from “very much like me” to “not like me at all”). You can take the Grit Scale test yourself

at www.angeladuckworth.com/grit-scale/.

While you may decide to spare your team members from actually taking this test, there is value in keeping an eye out for grittiness levels in prospective candidates. Grit counts toward success.

The above has been adapted with the kind permission of Globe Law and Business from Bjarne's book, [Building an Outstanding Legal Team: Battle-Tested Strategies from a General Counsel](#).

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