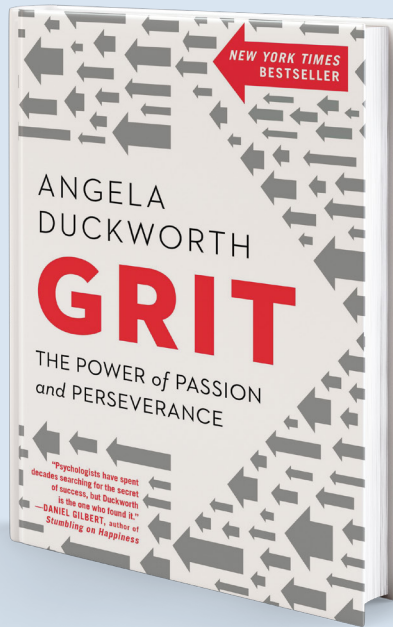


Book Snaps™

In-depth reviews of best-selling business books.



Grit

By Angela Duckworth

Angela Duckworth, PhD, is a 2013 MacArthur Fellow and professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. She has advised the World Bank, NBA and NFL teams, and Fortune 500 CEOs. She is also the founder and CEO of Character Lab, a nonprofit whose mission is to advance scientific insights that help kids thrive. She completed her BA in neurobiology at Harvard, her MSc in neuroscience at Oxford, and her PhD in psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* is her first book and an instant New York Times bestseller.

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A Book Review by Soundview

How to Solve Painful Problems in Business

Angela Duckworth is a former math teacher, current professor of psychology, co-founder of the nonprofit Character Lab, and 2013 MacArthur Fellow. This particular award is sometimes called the “genius grant.” When Duckworth got the news that she had been selected for the prize she was transported back to her childhood to “ponder the irony of the situation.”

You see, throughout her life, her father had a habit of reminding her and her siblings of their intellectual shortcomings. He would regularly say, “You know, you’re no genius.” He seemed overly concerned with innate talent and intelligence and appeared to be disappointed that his offspring failed to measure up to his excessively-high standard. The girl who was told over and over that “she’s no genius ends up winning an award for being one.”

But, her father’s offhand diagnoses were not really wrong. Duckworth is not an actual genius and she didn’t become a MacArthur Fellow because she was superior to her colleagues at an intellectual level. She got there through passion and perseverance. She has spent her career engaged in work for which she is passionate. She challenges herself to be better and do better in that work continuously. When met with an obstacle that knocks her down, she gets back up. She writes, “I may not be the smartest person in the room, but I’ll strive to be the grittiest.” And that has made all the difference.

Duckworth has operated under the assumption that “in the long run, grit may matter more than talent.” Years later she has the scientific evidence to back it up. And she doesn’t stop there. Her research has shown that grit is liable to change and fluctuate, not fixed and therefore, it can be grown. In *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, Angela Duckworth summarizes all that she has researched and learned about grit so that you can apply it to your own calling in life.

What Grit Is and Why It Matters

There are many ways in which we describe “grit” that we observe in everyday life. It is a “never give up attitude.” It is a “kind of hang-in-there posture toward challenge.” It is a deep-seeded

drive to keep going when times get tough. It is the will to pick yourself up and try again each and every time you fail. People who are highly successful in their chosen field, whether it be athletics, military, leadership, teaching, an artistic pursuit, or something else entirely, there are commonalities in how they operate.

Highly accomplished people are “paragons of perseverance.” They are never complacent. They continue striving for the goal even when they have to do things that are “boring, or frustrating, or even painful” along the way. They never even consider giving up. Their passion endures, regardless of challenges. Duckworth writes, “In sum, no matter the domain, the highly successful had a kind of ferocious determination that played out in two ways.

First, these exemplars were unusually resilient and hardworking. Second, they knew in a very, very deep way what it was they wanted. They not only had determination, they had direction. It was this combination of passion and perseverance that made high achievers special. In a word, they had grit.”

Having identified the common ingredients of grit, Duckworth set her sites on figuring out how to measure something that was completely intangible. She poured over her research notes looking for words and phrases and traits that showed what it was like to have grit. As she compiled the data, a list of questions emerged, half of which were about passion and half of which were about perseverance. These questions became “the Grit Scale—a test that, when taken honestly, measures the extent to which you approach life with grit.”

A key finding from Duckworth’s early work was that there was not a positive correlation between talent and grit. At first it was surprising to her that the talented would not endure and continue trying hard to achieve in their field. But she learned that “talent is no guarantee of grit.” One of the deep explorations in the book is centered around this finding as Duckworth explores the reasons why.

People with “grittier” scores on the Grit Scale successfully complete Beast Barracks at West Point, graduate high school on schedule, stay in rejection-filled sales jobs, make it through Special Forces training in the military, and earn more higher degrees. The grittier the score, the more likely a person will stay the course.

It boils down to an insight that served as a foundational guide for all of Duckworth’s later work. “Our potential is one thing. What we do with it is quite another.” As a middle school math teacher, Duckworth could plainly observe that some of her students had greater innate talent in math than others. They just seemed to get it, without even trying. But when it came to performance, some of those talented kids failed to live up to their potential. And some who had lackluster innate ability put in hard work and achieved at high levels.

Aptitude and achievement are different animals all together, even in an area like math where we conventionally classify students into “math people” or “not math people.” When we overly focus on talent, we lose sight of what Duckworth believes is far more important: effort.

Most of us are audience observers to those that are considered wildly talented. Musicians, professional or Olympic athletes, writers, and others awe us with their abilities to perform something so extraordinary. But we are missing most of the full picture. We are not privy to what happens behind the scenes. We do not observe the hours upon hours of training and conditioning and practice that results in the spectacular performances we witness. Our inclination is to shake our heads or shrug and say, “It’s a gift! Nobody can teach you that.” But Duckworth says we are wrong. There are innumerable factors that come into play and effort is a major one.

Now, Duckworth concedes that Micheal Phelps-level achievement is not available to anyone who puts in the required effort. There are anatomical advantages that cannot be selected, for example. The point is that greatness is something that is “doable” because greatness is really a compilation “of many, many, individual feats” and taken individually, they are each attainable. And further, we have the capacity to grow our grit and thus, improve our levels of achievement.

Growing Grit from Inside Out

One need only attend a graduation ceremony from any higher-educational institution to hear the advice “do what you love.” Despite the fact that we hear this message time and again, many of us choose practicality over passion. However, for some, “finding something you love” ends up being “a breadcrumb trail into poverty and disappointment.” Is it ludicrous to advise fledgling adults to seek love over security? Duckworth revealed the “definitive answer” generated from scientific research on the topic over the last decade. Turns out, interest is a key factor.

“Research shows that people are enormously more satisfied with their jobs when they do something that fits their personal interests.” People who have this level of job satisfaction are also “happier with their lives as a whole.” They actually have better performance outcomes compared to those who do not have interest in their work, too. This goes for paid professional workers as well as students who are studying something that genuinely interests them. These interested students get better grades and stick with their degree program until they finish.

Of course, we cannot expect to make a living doing just anything that we have interest in doing. “Nobody is interested in everything, and everyone is interested in something. So matching your job to what captures your attention and imagination is a good idea. It may not guarantee happiness and success, but it sure helps the odds.” Maybe, then, the advice dolled out at commencement ceremonies should be for young people to “foster a passion” so that they have a well of interests from which to choose.

Everyone has heard the saying “practice makes perfect.” The kicker, though, is that not all practice is good practice. Those who become experts in their field and achieve greatness do not simply log more and more hours of practice. They practice differently than others. They do what Duckworth calls “deliberate practice.” This involves several steps.

First, “set a stretch goal” that targets a specific and narrow component of the skill. Second, make intentional efforts to



We can look for ways in which our work impacts the greater good and, in doing so, identify the purpose.”

reach the goal with “undivided attention and great effort.” Finally, seek feedback about what could be improved to make the performance of the targeted skill even better. This process is repeated again and again and again until the skill is mastered and a new stretch goal can be set.

Purpose is “the intention to contribute to the well-being of others” and it is also an important component to growing grit. When work has a higher purpose and meaning than the related tasks themselves, we are working with purpose. Duckworth’s research showed that people who are grittier as scored by her Grit Scale are far more likely to “see their ultimate aims as deeply connected to the world beyond themselves.

For most of us, having purpose is deeply motivating. Interestingly, it is not the job itself that is or is not filled with purpose. It is more about how the person performing the job views it. We can look for ways in which our work impacts the greater good and, in doing so, identify the purpose.

Finally, grit relies on hope. This is not the kind of hope that something beyond our control will change. “It rests on the expectation that our own efforts can improve our future. The first kind of hope leaves it to the universe by pure chance or otherworldly intervention. We hope that tomorrow will be better. With the hope that influences grit, “we resolve to make tomorrow better.” Intention and determination place us in the driver’s seat with the firm understanding that what we do changes outcomes, not chance.

Growing Grit from Outside In

Duckworth has more good news for those who are interested in helping others increase their grittiness. Parents, teachers, coaches, and organizational leaders can all “encourage grit” in the people they care about. Duckworth labels this kind of “bringing forth” as parentlike, whether it’s coming from an actual mother, father, or guardian or if it is coming from a coach, teacher, mentor, or manager. “The word parenting derives from Latin and means “to bring forth.” Therefore, you’re acting in a parentlike way if you’re asking for guidance on how to best bring forth interest, practice, purpose, and hope” in others.

There are two extremes on the continuum. To the far right of center, authoritarian parenting requires very high standards, little coddling, and more than the occasional scowl. On the other end of the spectrum are “child-centered” parents who lavish children with support, comfort, and choice on an unconditional basis.

In an attempt to answer which approach is best at fostering grit, Duckworth first states that there is a lack of research on

the subject of parenting for grit but she is comfortable dispensing some advice on the topic nonetheless. Combing through separate research on parenting and separate research on grit revealed a pattern.

Duckworth says, “there’s no either/or trade-off between supportive parenting and demanding parenting. When we look closely at the two ends of the spectrum, we find commonalities. Parents put the needs of their children first without allowing the children themselves to determine “what to do, how hard to work, and when to give up on things.” In fact, research over a span of four decades has shown that “the children of psychologically wise parents fare better than children raised in any other kind of household.”

This type of parenting style is both supportive and demanding. “When our parents are loving, respectful, and demanding, we not only follow their example, we revere it. We not only comply with their requests we understand why they’re making them.” In other words, parents who are gritty themselves end up having gritty children.

Angela Duckworth refers to research subjects who demonstrate grittiness in an exemplary fashion as “grit paragons.” Time and time again, these high achievers report that they find their work to be thrilling, that they look forward to the challenges of each day, and that they know their passion-filled work serves a greater purpose than themselves. There is deep satisfaction in “doing something important” that is also very hard. In fact, the difficulty and joy they gain from finishing and succeeding through the difficulty of their task makes the internal reward all the more sweet.

In *Grit*, Duckworth shows us that we all have the ability to become gritty and in doing so, both reach our highest potential and draw out the potential in others. It’s an endeavor worth every difficult moment because gritty people “recognize that complacency has its charm, but none worth trading for the fulfillment of realizing their potential.” Grit, as Duckworth poignantly puts it, is “putting one foot in front of the other. To be gritty is to hold fast to an interesting and purposeful goal. To be gritty is to invest, day after week after year, in challenging practice. To be gritty is to fall down seven times, and rise eight.” And each of our lives, families, schools, organizations, and governments could use more of that.

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