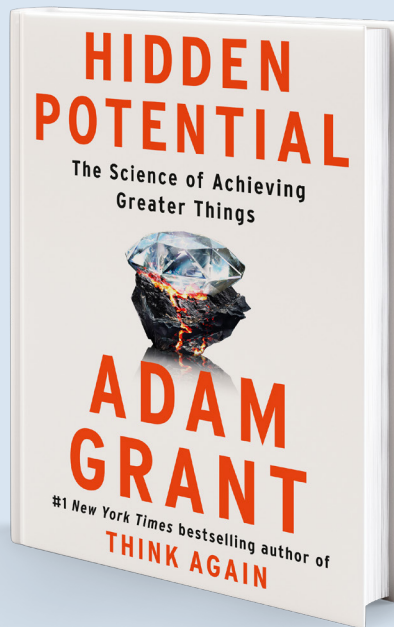


Book Snaps™

In-depth reviews of best-selling business books.



Hidden Potential

The Science of Achieving Greater Things

By Adam Grant

Adam Grant is an organizational psychologist at Wharton, where he has been the top-rated professor for seven straight years. A #1 New York Times bestselling author and one of TED's most popular speakers, his books have sold millions of copies and been translated into 45 languages, his talks have been viewed over 35 million times, and his podcasts Re:Thinking and WorkLife have been downloaded over 65 million times. His pioneering research has inspired people to rethink fundamental assumptions about motivation, generosity, creativity, and potential.

A Book Review by Soundview

Reaching New Levels of Mastery

In his book, *Hidden Potential: The Science of Achieving Greater Things*, Adam Grant attempts to help people and groups grow and improve. He focuses his book on such topics as avoiding perfectionism, overcoming stagnation, and improving institutions such as schools and workplaces. He breaks his book up into three different sections, and he includes anecdotes, academic research, and statistics to help his reader understand the importance of each of his concepts.

Skills of Character

The first set of skills Grant discusses are skills of character. He defines character as “your capacity to prioritize your values over your instincts” Grant sees character as being a plastic or moldable trait. It is not enough for a person to just know their values; more is required in order for a person to live by their values during difficult times. That is where character comes in.

Grant discusses discomfort and embracing awkwardness. For Grant, “the best way to accelerate growth is to embrace, seek, and amplify discomfort.” He goes into a discussion of learning styles: an educational theory that maintains that different people learn in different ways. Grant believes that the idea of learning styles is a myth, and he believes that the research backs him up. People have learning preferences, he says, but these preferences can change over time. People develop these preferences based upon what makes them most comfortable. He wants his reader to embrace the discomfort of abandoning a preferred mode of learning, especially because a person's preferred way of learning does not always correspond to the way they learn best.

He moves on to discuss procrastination where he maintains that procrastination does not stem from laziness but rather from a person's desire to avoid the uncomfortable feelings associated with whatever activity is being put off. He believes in the value of doing uncomfortable things as he quotes Ted Lasso, “If you're comfortable, you're doin' it wrong.” Grant believes that “it's not enough to simply accept minimal discomfort when it arises. Surprisingly, we're better off actively seeking out discomfort. To do this, people have to be willing

to try new things and make mistakes.

In his second chapter, Grant moves on to discuss ways a person can increase their ability to both absorb information and adapt to it. “Absorptive capacity is the ability to recognize, value, assimilate, and apply new information.” This involves the way a person acquires information as well as the way they filter information. On one hand, people can be driven by reactivity and ego, but this often stops learning. Other people drive themselves by proactivity and ego. These people seek out input on what they do and are effectively able to respond to this feedback in ways that can make them better. Others are reactive and growth-oriented. These people are highly coachable because they are able to improve based upon feedback. The most effective people, however, are both proactive and growth oriented, and he describes such people as being sponges. They constantly seek improvement.

Grant’s final chapter in this section focuses on dealing with imperfection. He demonstrates a rise in perfectionism in numerous countries including the United States. He believes one factor in this rise is social media where people are focused on curating images for these platforms. Perfectionism is not a good thing. In fact, research shows that perfectionism has no impact on a person’s outcomes. If anything, people may perform worse if they are perfectionists than if they had more leeway in their expectations. There are three reasons that explain the harm of perfectionism. The first is that people who are perfectionists tend to focus on unimportant details, and this can cause them to overlook other important problems. Second, perfectionists tend to avoid situations in which they could fail, resulting in a failure to develop new skills. Finally, perfectionists are so harsh on themselves for making mistakes that they tend not to learn from them. In the end, he believes that perfectionism stunts growth. The key is for a person to create achievable and realistic standards and then adjust these standards as necessary. He admits that “finding beauty in imperfection is often easier said than done.” Perfectionists do not benefit by hearing someone tell them to do their best. This can actually make performance worse. Rather, they benefit by people giving them both specific and difficult goals.

Structure for Motivation

In the second part of his book, Grant moves on to scaffolding. The character skills he previously discussed are important, but sometimes more is required in order for a person to truly grow. In such situations, scaffolding becomes important. Scaffolding refers to aid that can be put into place that can help a person achieve what they would not otherwise be able to. Scaffolding frequently comes from outside of oneself, and as such, it is important for people to look outward to others when in need of help. It is important that scaffolding is particularly tailored to the task at hand and that it comes at the right time. Finally, it is important that scaffolding remains temporary so that people can put the structures to the side when it becomes appropriate.

In his fourth chapter, Grant discusses passion. He believes that a key to unlocking potential is “to transform the daily grind into a source of daily joy” He discusses the unsuitability of work obsession because obsessed individuals tend not to perform

any better than other people. Rather, they are more prone to exhaustion, burnout, and boreout. He describes that latter as the emotional deadening that can occur from under stimulation. Hard work is important, but it is also important not to drive oneself to the point of obsession.

Instead of obsession, a person should aim for harmonious passion. This refers to “taking joy in a process rather than feeling pressure to achieve an outcome.” When a person works within this zone, they are able to become absorbed in a project while the world slips away around them. This happens because the person is not motivated by shoulds. While his book focuses on this quality with musicians, he says it applies to many different areas, and that scaffolding is what will help people bring about that passion.

People can bring out the joy in an activity by incorporating deliberate play. This can come in many different forms including improvisational play and role-playing. He contrasts gamification with deliberate play. In the latter, people often incorporate gimmicks in order to provide subjects with a dopamine rush. This rush helps people avoid boredom. Grant does not believe that this is enough to help people turn something they dislike into something enjoyable the way that deliberate play can. With deliberate play, the goal is to change the very task in order to make it motivating.

Next Grant discusses how a person can get unstuck. He believes that getting unstuck can prove to be one of the most difficult parts of skill development. This is where stagnation can come in. He believes that “a rut is not a sign that you’ve tanked. A plateau is not a cue that you’ve peaked. They’re signals that it may be time to turn around and find a new route.” He believes that sometimes this requires a person to choose a different path even if it requires backing up a bit. Researchers have found that after stagnating, people frequently decline before they are able to continue to improve. This improvement comes after a person has found a new method to help them overcome stagnation, and this involves trial and error. To demonstrate this, Grant discusses sports teams when a star player gets injured and cannot play. These teams tend to get worse briefly, but when the star player returns, they are better than ever because the other players had to, through trial and error, figure out ways to step up and improve. In many situations, there is not a clear guide on how to do this. Rather, people have to figure things out one step at a time. Usually, he believes that once a person starts moving down a new path, they will find they never really needed a map to begin with.

Grant discusses the role of teaching in the name of improvement. He references the old adage that people who cannot do something, teach it. He turns this around as he believes that teaching others is a primary way that people can learn and grow. He also finds that those who are experts in an area tend not to be the best teachers because they have forgotten the difficulties faced by beginners and tend to speak over their students’ heads. Students often learn more from people who are not experts in a field for this particular reason. Grant comes to the conclusion that expert direction can lead people stranded and frustrated and that a person might learn better from someone with slightly



... expert direction can lead people stranded and frustrated and that a person might learn better from someone with slightly less expertise.”

less expertise. Another problem with looking to others for help is that often a learner will not share the same sets of strengths and weaknesses as those they are learning from. This means that the starting point towards a set destination is different for different people. Because of this, he recommends people getting advice and guidance from multiple people rather than just one.

In his last chapter in part two, Grant discusses facing daunting tasks. The key is to view daunting tasks as conquerable challenges rather than as threats. This requires a growth mindset and a belief in one's ability to improve. Sometimes scaffolding is necessary in order for a person to achieve this optimal mindset, and this scaffolding can come in the form of bootstrapping. Most people think bootstrapping refers to pulling oneself up out of a predicament or undesirable place without any help, but he says that this is not the case. Rather it refers to a person using the resources they have to improve their position. This is best achieved through interdependence rather than through independence. As an example Grant refers to a class he teaches at Wharton. He told his students that on a particularly difficult test, they could choose one person in their class with which to consult on a single question of their choosing. The students did better on the exam than students in previous years had. This is because the students studied together so they knew who knew what types of information. They worked interdependently.

Grant then moves on to two other types of scaffolding that can help a person overcome difficulties. The first is coaching. He believes that when people help others build confidence, they build their own confidence as well, and they also help a person find their own motivation. Second is through doubt. When people are doubted by experts, they can recoil and fail because they believe the opinions of experts. When people are doubted by less credible authorities, however, motivation can be increased because they want to prove others wrong. In this way, certain types of doubt can help people to achieve what they otherwise would not have been able to.

Systems of Opportunity

Grant discusses systems of opportunity, beginning with educational opportunity. Grant describes how the education system in the United States “is built around a culture of winner take all” where people are pigeon holed by early perceived innate ability or lack thereof. Those who are perceived as gifted are given ample resources while those perceived as less capable are frequently punished. Finland, whose education system has been proven to be more effective than others, operates under the supposition that all students have abilities that manifest in different ways, and highly autonomous teachers are tasked with the responsi-

bility of discovering and helping develop these abilities in each individual student. Furthermore, students frequently have the same teacher for at least two years in a row. This helps teachers get to know students well and because of this, teachers are able to tailor experiences for them more effectively.

Grant then discusses teams. Referencing the rescue of Chilean miners, he says that building teams is not just about gathering together the best group of experts. Rather, it is about relying on the strengths and contributions of all team members. A big part of effectiveness in groups relies on prosocial skills and the degree to which people understand the need they have for others. He maintains that people often choose the person who speaks the most to be the leader, finding that this to be is a measure of ability. He finds that reactive groups frequently do best with extraverted leaders, but introverts are better leaders for proactive teams where the contributions of many members lead to greater success.

In his final section, Grant focuses his attention on finding hidden gems in job interviews as well as in the college admissions process. He believes that in these arenas, people are at the risk of focusing too much on past achievement instead of looking for the potential for future achievement. It is important that people with authority in these positions focus on people who are still rising to the top amidst numerous roadblocks as well as to look for people who are capable of learning to do a job rather than just on how long a person has done a similar job in the past. He believes that context is important in the judgment of the suitability of individuals for a job or school.

Because he ends his book focusing on systems, Grant effectively shows how his principles can help people in their personal lives, professional lives as well as in their part as a member of a community. Adam Grant's book is highly readable because of the extent to which his concepts are backed up by stories of individuals as well as of groups. This leaves readers with a clear guide for success.

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