“Grit” Review and Summary

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Book Review

The quality of grit helps people throughout their lives, in many different contexts. It is a useful and important quality that can lead to life satisfaction and happiness. Angela Duckworth’s work *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* is a step-by-step guidebook for both fostering the quality of grit within yourself and helping your children, students or employees unlock the power of grit for themselves.

There is a lot to admire here. Most of the information Duckworth presents is backed by hard data, and where it is not, the author is scrupulous in explaining how she arrived at her conclusions (based on her own life experiences). She draws inspiration from many different sources, which is something of a mixed bag. Large percentages of her examples come from her experiences with West Point Academy and with the world of sports— readers who aren’t sports fans, or have little interest in the military, might struggle with applying these examples to their own lives. Furthermore, there is a notable discussion that leverages scientific research on dogs conducted in the 1960s. Animal lover or not, it might be difficult to digest.

Nevertheless, Duckworth’s writing style is a model of clarity in communication. The information in *Grit* is solid and lays out a clear path of action for anyone who chooses to follow it.

Chapter 1

Getting into West Point is even harder than getting into Harvard. It's very demanding. Only the cream-of-the-crop applicants are admitted: they must have top test scores and they must display the highest levels of physical and mental fitness. Yet after everything it takes to be admitted, some people drop out of West Point shortly after arriving.

Psychologists have tried to suss out why some make it through these hard times at West Point and others do not. West Point tests people extensively during the admissions process, but they still have trouble predicting who will drop out. As it turns out, what gets people through their first year at West Point is the same thing that gets people through the tribulations they experience in challenging careers: grit.

West Point has a considerable two month initiation, which is when most of the cadets who drop out leave. The sort of people who make it through this ordeal are the type who keep going after

failure. This is typical of successful people in general. They tend to have high standards and to set impossible goals. They are passionate and love what they do. They are determined and have direction. In short, they exhibit passion and perseverance. They have grit.

Based on interviews and other research, Duckworth devised a grit test and a grit scale. She tried it out on West Point cadets, and there was a strong correlation between low grit scores and dropping out. There was no correlation between finishing the hard course and talent, and no correlation between completing the program and any of the other qualities that were measured in the tests undertaken during admission. The predictive quality for successfully graduating from West Point isn't intelligence or talent; it's grit.

The author ran tests in other situations with other populations: sales professionals, public school students, college graduates and green berets. The results were the same— perseverance wins the day. In fact, one study showed an inverse relationship between intelligence and grit. Smart kids were slightly less gritty than their cohorts. Potential and achievement are clearly two different things.

Chapter 2

Francis Galton was a shirttail relative of Charles Darwin. Galton did a study of successful people in the 19th century, and he concluded that there are three things that make people successful: ability, zeal and the capability to work hard. Cousin Darwin was surprised that talent even made the list— he knew perseverance was much more important. In Darwin's opinion, most people are mostly alike. Differences in intelligence and talent simply aren't great enough between people to account for the wide disparity in individual success. Not only was Darwin a big achiever himself, plenty of biographical information exists to illustrate that he was the sort who persevered.

If you ask around, people will say that effort is more important than talent, yet many are awed by supposed naturals and their gifts. It is a hidden prejudice, being biased for talent over effort. And when we believe that someone is talented, we tend to shower them with attention— and we expect more from them. These things help people achieve more, so it's a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Duckworth used to work at McKinsey. During her tenure there, she describes doing a lot of work that companies had to contract out because they didn't have time to do it themselves. But people also hired McKinsey because the consultants were known to be smart. (Companies try to hire the most talented and fire the least talented.) When you crunch the numbers, though, the companies that hired McKinsey consultants didn't do any better than if they tried to solve their problems in-house— in fact, they often did worse.

Enron prioritized talent; they were hailed as being innovative. But they failed due to massive

accounting fraud. Many good people who themselves had no hand in the wrongdoing lost their jobs. The problem was that everybody on the planet knew how smart they were, including themselves. Company culture became narcissistic and smug— but insecure, also, so they had to keep showing off. Short term performance was prioritized over long term learning. The company fired the lowest performing 15% of employees every year, which encouraged widespread deception, as people were desperate to avoid the cut.

Talent isn't a bad thing by any means, but it isn't the only, or most important, thing. It is simply one factor of many. And putting so much attention on talent disvalues everything else.

Chapter 3

When people achieve something, we label them “talented,” but talent really isn’t extraordinary. In fact, it’s sort of common and mundane. We say it's a gift and the person is a natural, just because we can't fathom that greatness is doable. Greatness is composed of multiple individual accomplishments— they are all doable.

We want the process to be mysterious. We want it to be magic. We don't want to know how Olympic swimmer Mark Spitz got to be so good— that way we don’t feel so bad about not replicating his achievements. Mythologizing talent means we don't qualify anyway, so we might as well relax and not try so hard. And Nietzsche agrees with us. Greatness happens when people strive in one direction, when they use everything available to them, when they are awesome observers who look at everything as potential models and never stop trying. Nietzsche is not so much into talent. Sure, people might be gifted, but they don't achieve greatness without great effort.

Talent + effort = skill. And skill x effort = achievement. Effort counts twice— it builds skill and it makes skills productive. After doing something repeatedly, no matter how hard it is, it becomes easy. But people give up. They knit incomplete sweaters, write incomplete novels, don’t stick with diets. They give up. Strivers, on the other hand, improve their skill so that they are better than the talented who are complacent. It takes people a long time to develop expertise. This is one reason why perseverance is important. You have to stick with one thing for a long time to get really, really good at it.

Chapter 4

There is a test that gauges grit, scoring takers on their level of agreement with statements such as "I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge" and "My interests change from year to year." Average results of American adults are given alongside individual results, so you can compare yourself to others. Duckworth is quick to point out that this test can only

measure how gritty you perceive yourself to be. Nonetheless, that can be useful information, especially when it comes to a quality that in some measure is enriched by self-esteem.

Whatever your score, rest assured that it can be changed. Your grit score is composed of two parts: passion and perseverance. These components can be calculated separately using the grit test. Most people score a little higher on perseverance than they do on passion, which, in this context, doesn't mean intensity. This passion is more about being consistent over time.

It’s important to have a philosophy, an overarching vision. Imagine a hierarchy of goals: at the bottom are little goals (like get to work on time), and at the top are important goals (like have a great career). The little goals feed into those higher up. You have to follow your goals steadily over time, and the smaller goals have to serve the larger goals. Lack of grit can be a result of not having coherent goal structures. Sometimes people have a dream, but they don't know how to get there. They don't know which low- and mid-level goals would lead them down the path. Or sometimes people have mid-level goals, but there is no big picture tying it together. Sometimes people have a bunch of different goals that have nothing in common. (Of course, we all have this to a certain extent.)

It might not be possible, or even desirable, to have one single goal rule our lives, in which case maybe we should just have one to rule our professional lives. But the more aligned our goals’ hierarchies, the better. Prioritize your career goals, because your time and energy are limited. Learn to avoid the things that take you off track. You need one internal compass. Grit isn't about stubbornly pursuing every goal you have.

To succeed with higher-level goals, sometimes you need to be flexible with the lower-level goals. Not everything you try will be successful; you have to rearrange things to account for setbacks and failures. But through it all, you should keep your eye on the prize, stick to the big goal.

Chapter 5

Grit: nature or nurture? This is a complex question, because all of our traits are influenced by both. Even traits that seem mostly heritable, like height, are affected by environment. Consider how average height has grown in modern times as diet and other aspects of life have improved. So talents and abilities— even grit— are influenced by nature and nurture. You can be talented, but if you don't stick with it, you won’t get anywhere.

IQ scores have risen considerably in the last century, mostly due to increases in abstract reasoning. Our opportunities to think abstractly have increased in the modern world, and the more we think about something and do something, the better we get at it. Then, we improve the environment for that thing so others get it, too. This is known as the multiplier effect.

There doesn't appear to be a difference between generations (Baby Boomers at age 20 were no grittier than Millennials at age 20), but grit does improve with age. Life experience changes people. We learn what we like and what we don't like. We learn important life lessons, for example, that it takes a lot of effort to accomplish something worthwhile. We also adapt over time, because that's what people do. We change when we need to.

The important thing to know is that grit isn't a fixed quality. We can cultivate it. If you want to be grittier, start by asking yourself why you aren't already as gritty as you'd like to be. People quit things because they get bored, because they think it isn't worthwhile, because they don't have faith in themselves. To overcome these problems, there are four traits that you'll need:

- Interest: You need to care and be curious. Love the things that you do.
- Practice: If you don't practice, you're going to suck. Persevere daily. Master your subject.
- Purpose: There must be a reason to do what you do.
- Hope: If you don't think it's possible, you won't try to do it.

If you don't already have these traits in abundance, that's OK— you can still cultivate them.

Chapter 6

At high school graduation ceremonies, the commencement speaker often tells the new graduates to follow their passion. And it's true— successful people do tend to like their work. As kids, most of us were told that they will have to learn to live in the real world, that making money is important and following your desires is too risky. But research shows (we're talking many, many studies here) that people like their jobs more when their work is related to their interests. Research also shows people do better at their work when they like what they're doing.

Many people aren't doing work they enjoy. Gallup polls show that most people aren't very engaged at work. We don't have to love every minute of our work— such a thing isn't possible— but we should find something that we think is interesting. Often, kids and young adults hear "follow your passion" at a time when they have yet to cultivate any passions. People assume it will be like a lightning strike when they discover their passion. But it's generally not. Often, you have to search for it.

It's like looking for a romantic partner. You won't find love at first sight (I hate to break it to you), and you likely won't find an interest right away that's totally perfect. Interests are discovered through interactions with the world. There's no sure fire recipe for how to find what interests you, you have to just get out there and knock around for a bit.

Once you find an interest, there's a period of development. You get more exposure, and you get more interested. And interests do better with support— those with family, friends, coaches and

teachers rooting for them are more likely to stay engaged. Perseverance is also needed to succeed, and interest makes it easier to persevere. It's important to persevere. People might enjoy hobbies for a while and then move on. But it's bad to do this with careers. Boredom is normal, but not inevitable.

Experts and beginners are motivated by different things. Beginners need plenty of exposure to the thing, lots of encouragement and space to explore it independently. They also need small wins to keep them going. Feedback, criticism and practice are all necessary things, but not in such quantity as to squash interest.

Chapter 7

Grittier kids do better at spelling bees. Kids who spend more time on homework get better grades.

Grittier people spend more time working on a task. There are some people, though, who work for years at a job and don't improve much. They hit a plateau. But it's not just how much time you spend on a task, it's also the quality of the time you spend. Skill improves gradually over many years. You must be persistent and work on continuous improvement.

It takes about 10 years of focused practice to become expert at something. The longer someone's at it, though, the slower the rate of improvement. How you practice is important. *Deliberate practice* is a useful technique. Begin by setting a stretch goal. Look for challenges that you can't quite meet yet, and gradually ramp up your performance. Once you hit your goal, set a new stretch goal and so on.

It's good to practice alone some of the time, but you also want to get feedback on what you are doing wrong, so it's good to have a coach. Even if you don't have a coach, you can benefit from deliberate practice with:

- A well-defined stretch goal.
- Full concentration and effort.
- Immediate feedback.
- Repetition with reflection.

Make deliberate practice a regular habit. Get into a routine. Practice in the same time and place, so it becomes automatic. All types of skills can be improved in this way.

You'll hear some people talk about flow, about how the best performance happens while in the zone. It is fun to be in the zone, but it doesn't just happen. You have to do the hard work as preparation. Practice sucks, but the results rock.

There is, however, a point when hard work can become counter-productive. When you push yourself, you can really only work about an hour at a time and then you need a break. In total, you should work three to five hours a day— max. And rest is important after practice.

Change the way you experience practice. We get embarrassed when we make mistakes, and this is unpleasant. We're told failure is bad, so we feel ashamed when we fail. But we need to get over it.

Chapter 8

People develop a passion for something either because it interests them or because it gives them a feeling of purpose. Purpose, in this context, is defined as contributing to the well-being of others. But usually it's only after people enjoy something that they reflect on how it can help people.

There are two ways to pursue happiness: we can try to satisfy ourselves or we can try to help others. These are both natural drivers. Survival requires us to look after ourselves, and as social animals, it's also instinctive to help others. We all have these drives in different proportions, but gritty people appear to be far more into helping others than those with perhaps less grit. In other words, they're connected to the world and to others. Purpose is a huge motivator. Nevertheless, people who both enjoy the work and want to help others are the ones who do best.

Most people describe their work as a "job" or "career"— few would refer to it a "calling." But these are the fortunate ones. People who consider their work a calling do better work, are more productive and have fewer sick days. And they tend to be happy with their lives. Of course, there's nothing wrong with looking at your work as a job or career, but any job can be a calling if you look at it right. It's how you see your work that's important.

As is true with discovering your interests, you don't just *find* your calling. These things must be cultivated. It can take a long time for your job to become your passion. Think about how your work connects to other people; think about how your work expresses your values and contributes to society. Think about the bigger picture. And once you're interested in something, find a role model. You need to see that someone can do something purposeful and succeed. People have to believe that they can personally make a difference, that it's not useless to try.

Chapter 9

Gritty people have hope. They think they can improve the future through their own efforts. Getting up each time they're knocked down requires having faith that ultimately, they'll succeed.

Optimists look for the cause of their suffering, which they assume to be temporary and solvable. Optimists do better in all areas of life, and gritty people explain their setbacks in optimistic tones. Yes, they failed, but they'll do better next time. Pessimists, on the other hand, think permanent and persuasive causes are at fault. They are more likely than optimists to get depressed and anxious.

Some people think they encounter failure because they are dumb, rather than because they don't try. This core belief leads to failure. Cognitive behavioral therapy teaches us that we can learn to interpret the events in our lives positively. Because grit, optimism and happiness are all correlated, there are many reasons to strive for this. When you keep looking for ways to improve your situation you're more likely to find it. Many of us are unaware of how much in life is defined by thoughts. If you think you can change your level of intelligence, then you can. If you think it's hopeless, then it probably is.

Optimists are said to have a growth mindset as opposed to an attitude of failure. With a growth mindset, if you have a setback, it makes you work hard. People with this mindset are grittier than those with an attitude of failure. These attitudes, whatever they may be, come from our personal histories, illustrating the importance of instilling the right mindset in our children. Kids should be praised for effort rather than for whatever natural talents they might exhibit. And if you react to mistakes like they're harmful and problematic, kids are less likely to learn from them.

Welcome mistakes as learning opportunities. That being said, doing so isn't always easy. We get impatient and frustrated with people we're trying to coach. Maybe we say the right things, but we scowl and our body language screams "loser!" Don't overreact to failure; instead, analyze what happened. Practice falling and then getting up again.

Some people become competent and think they can't grow more than they already have. But hard work matters. A fixed mindset about your abilities leads to pessimistic explanations which, in turn, leads to giving up and even avoiding challenges altogether. A growth mindset leads to optimism leads to perseverance.

The brain gets smarter with use. Your intelligence is never fixed; you can always grow your brain. Practice talking to yourself optimistically. If you're a pessimist, maybe find yourself a therapist— it's good to get help from others.

Chapter 10

In this chapter, Duckworth points out that you don't have to be an actual biological parent to care about someone's development. Teachers, coaches and many others can provide guidance to young people, so when she refers to "parenting" here, she's broadly referring to guidance.

There's a considerable amount of research on parenting, and considerable research on grit, but little has been done on parenting *and* grit. Developing grit in a child doesn't require stern discipline and punishment. Back in the day, people thought that coddling children would lead to their ruin. On the other end of the spectrum, some parents are far too permissive, which is just about as bad.

But setting limits doesn't preclude a parent from being supportive. People can do both— and they should do both, because children need both. The science is overwhelmingly in favor of the limit-setting-yet-supportive parenting style. Study after study shows this approach works better than any alternative.

Good parenting leads kids to emulate their parents, meaning they look favorably on the adult and want to be like them, rather than just reflexively copying them. Gritty people are usually proud of the people who raised them, and their parents are usually gritty, too.

In addition to being supportive and demanding, you have to model grit so that your kids will imitate, and hopefully emulate, you. Encouragement is important. And again, these things aren't just for parents. You can be a part of the village that raises the child. Even people with less-than-stellar parents can acquire grit with the right support.

Chapter 11

Although not validated by research, it seems as if extracurricular activities are likely to cultivate interest, practice, purpose and hope. Research *does* show that kids who participate in activities outside of the classroom do better in many different areas (grades, self-esteem, etc.). As long as children are not overscheduled, extracurricular activity is most likely good.

Kids should practice an activity for more than a year before parents allow them to give it up. Doing so will help them develop the discipline needed to pursue long term goals, which is essential for the development of grit. One study showed that two years of high school extracurricular activities greatly improved the odds that any given child would be employed in early adulthood.

But grades and test scores aren't the whole story when it comes to predicting children's future success. The Educational Testing Service (ETS) researched which factors might be good predictors, finding that follow through is the biggest quality that you want your kids to have. According to the ETS study, kids who can keep up a commitment to activities clearly do best. For example, they were much more likely to earn advanced degrees. It doesn't really matter *which* activities kids pursue— sports, school newspaper, chess club, whatever— the important thing is that they persevered over time.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is deeply interested in slowing the rate of college dropout. Duckworth did a study of high school seniors, estimating their level of grit based on their participation in extracurricular activities. With this information, she could accurately estimate the odds that someone would stay in college. It's possible that these kids were gritty to begin with, and that's why they participate in outside activities for long time spans. While there could be some truth to that, it also seems likely that this participation cultivates grit.

When people develop grit through an activity like athletics it translates to other activities, so that the footballer in high school has the perseverance to stick with calculous in college. Schools, especially in poor districts, are cutting after school activities: this is so wrong, and it's putting those kids at a greater disadvantage. There is a strong connection between childhood poverty and lower grit scores.

Chapter 12

Culture— the shared values and expectations of a group of people— can foster grit. So if you are a leader, you can cultivate grit in your organization and make the culture grittier.
And if you want to be a grittier person, join a gritty culture. For example, if you want to be a great athlete, try to join a great team. You'll be surrounded by ambitious people who get up at 4 a.m. to practice. Before you know it, it'll seem normal to get up at 4 a.m. It will become a habit.

Culture can shape our identity. An awful lot of what we do can be traced back to our identity. This is especially true of grit. If you think you aren't a quitter, you're more likely to persevere. If you think you're able to overcome great adversity, your behavior will usually conform to that conclusion. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

An interesting example in the book, Duckworth explores how people in Finland treasure perseverance. It's an important part of their culture and therefore their identity. (Even with great self-control, your humble reviewer can't avoid commenting that this explains why they can *Finnish* their projects.)

People have a strong urge to fit in with the people around them. You can use this tendency for conformity to your advantage by consciously choosing who you spend time around. Any arena dominated by hard working people focused on success is likely to foster multiple gritty cultures. Role models are crucial. Leaders are also important. They need to model grit and to espouse it. It's important for organizations to have ethics codes, but they also got to walk the walk.

People can model grit for others. Be a good influence. This can cause a domino effect of grit.

Chapter 13

We tend to focus too much on talent, but what we get out of life depends a lot on our grit. Fortunately, you can develop grit within yourself. You can cultivate your interests and work hard every day on building your skills. You can connect your work to a purpose. And you can maintain hope, even when the chips seem stacked against you. Of course, success and hard work aren’t everything. You want to be happy, too, and there's a correlation between grit and happiness and well-being.

With most human qualities, there are problems with extremes, and Duckworth wonders if it's possible for one to be too gritty. It is certainly appropriate to give up sometimes and quit. Staying with a job or a romantic partner when you really should move on can be a big problem. Sticking with the wrong goals can cause you to miss opportunities that might suit you better. Realistically, however, few people seem to suffer from an overabundance of grit. Most of us could use more of it, not less.

Grit isn't the be all end all of human behavior. Some qualities are at least, if not much more, important than grit— for example, morality. Generally, there are three clusters of personality traits that are important and correspond to will, heart and mind:

- Intrapersonal characteristics include grit, as well as things like self-control. Gritty people tend to have a lot of self-control.
- Interpersonal traits include things like social skills and emotional maturity.
- Intellectual dimensions of character are things like curiosity and enthusiasm.

All these qualities are important, and a well-rounded person does well to cultivate them.

We all have our limits. Maybe you will never be another Mozart, but that's no reason to give up playing piano. It's important to learn from failure, which means failure is important. You’ve just got to learn from it and move on, don't let it defeat you. You can achieve amazing things. Believe it.