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BY LAURA W. GELLER

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If someone asked you to define *grit*, what images would come to mind? Windburned cowboys? Pioneers on the open plain? *Grit* has long been used in describing those who dig in their heels in the face of hardship, who persevere in even the most challenging circumstances and emerge victorious.

Angela Lee Duckworth, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, believes this same tenacious spirit can be found in those who achieve excellence in school, on the playing field, and in business. Talent and intelligence will get you only so far. The key ingredient to success, says Duckworth, is grit. It's that special something that keeps certain people dedicated to their goal (whether it involves their studies, their projects, their clients, or something else) for the long haul, determined to accomplish what they set out to do. It's a fascinating concept—one that recently won Duckworth a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant.

A former public school teacher, Duckworth has a passion for im-

proving education by understanding how grit affects a child's trajectory, and is developing new teaching methods and interventions based on her findings. But as we learned during a recent interview, her research also has implications for managers looking to cultivate a more capable workforce.

S+B: What attracted you to the concept of grit?

DUCKWORTH: In my first couple years of graduate school, I started asking the perennial question: Why are some people more successful than others? Obviously, I'm not the first to think about that—almost every major philosopher and many prominent psychologists have addressed this question.

“Talent” is a common answer, but I wasn't convinced that that was the whole story. I talked to prominent people—partners at successful investment banking firms, and individuals who had achieved elected office at relatively high levels of government—and I asked them: Which people are really the best in your field, and what are these outliers like?

They would rattle off a series of adjectives, but one theme emerged. In addition to talent, those highly

successful people had a kind of staying power. They were working not only with intensity, but also with stamina over long periods of time, incrementally chipping away at some goal. That led me to grit.

S+B: Is grit teachable?

DUCKWORTH: I think so, yes, but it's not easy. We're in the nascent stages of research on behavioral change, not just about grit, but about other things too. For example, look at the percentage of dollars spent on health problems that would be preventable if people ate right, exercised, and took their medication. It should be easy to get people to do things like save their own lives, but that's not always the case.

I do think that there's room for optimism, though. I start from the assumption that people are trying to do well by themselves, which is actually the premise of the whole economic model of behavior. They are trying to optimize their outcomes and avoid mistakes. I'm not trying to sell the idea that you can move people from the bottom 1 percent of the distribution in grit to the highest 1 percent. This isn't a “lose 10 pounds in two days” kind of idea. But I do think you can nudge people further to the right end of the grit spectrum.

S+B: How would that happen in a corporate environment? How can leaders encourage grittiness among their employees?

DUCKWORTH: The first thing managers should understand is that people who are gritty will doggedly pursue things that they really value. It's sort of like love: You can't be in love unless there's something or someone that you're in love *with*. Similarly, employees with grit are deeply and enduringly motivated by work they



Angela Duckworth

find meaningful. Top performers are genuinely driven to solve problems for clients, or to create tastier, healthier food for more people, and so on. Managers need to ensure that people have a goal or outcome that they hold in this high regard.

The second thing that I think is very important, from an economic point of view, is that people don't do things they perceive to be costly. When people are either keeping at something or walking away from it, it's usually a result of having done a cost-benefit analysis. For people to put in the effort to work on some distant goal, day in and day out, they have to perceive that the benefits are at least worth the cost. Managers can influence that by increasing the value of the reward or decreasing the perceived cost. Part of the cost element is communication, and getting across

from their effort may not be obvious for a long time.

S+B: How does corporate culture play into this?

DUCKWORTH: I do think there are companies that bring out the best in people. Through their explicit practices and their implicit culture, these companies encourage doing things for a long time, being loyal, going deep into problems, and working at the edge—where an employee's challenges exceed their current skill levels. Some of the best managers are the ones who create environments where it's easier for people to be gritty.

You can create a culture in which employees genuinely believe that the future could be different from the past, and that the problems that were here yesterday and today could in

has high GRE scores or SAT scores. That's not to say you shouldn't worry at all about these metrics. I don't ignore the grades of students who apply to work with me. But I also don't simply assume that if they have a perfect academic record that they're also going to be gritty people.

It suggests that we need something else in the selection process that gets at this element of perseverance and sustained commitment. An approach that I find promising is looking at people's resumes for evidence that they've been gritty prior to coming to your organization. Has a candidate worked at the same place for a sustained amount of time, and have they been promoted to greater levels of responsibility? The more that people have flopped around, the less gritty they are likely to be.

Of course today, culturally, we have a shift. The norm, the expectation, is that people are going to nip around from one company to another, even from one industry to another. But if people are very successful, oftentimes an underlying theme or a narrative emerges. You might look at their experience and realize, oh, this is all about managing—making decisions under conditions of uncertainty and complexity with large teams. Despite all the movement, there is a skill set that they have been honing over time.

S+B: What's the next frontier of research on grit?

DUCKWORTH: Right now I'm thinking about the difference between work and play. A lot of grit is about working hard and having the capacity to sustain that over time—and that all sounds pretty grim. There's this expression, "hard play." It's when something is really effortful and you're engaged in it, but there's

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the idea that there's no easy job waiting for employees somewhere else. All jobs, if you do them well, require huge amounts of effort.

Finally, and I think maybe most relevant for managers, are expectations. People need to believe that success is possible. But they also need to be realistic. A lot of people start working hard and expect immediate results. Yet the idea of improving in just a short time period is naive. If you look at world-class performers in any domain—ballet or math or chess—those people have not logged five really good hours or 10 really good hours. They've spent thousands and thousands of hours, spread over years and years of work. People need to know going in that the payoff

fact be solved. Mentorship is an important part of this process. Encourage people to have a trusted other—a friend, colleague, manager, somebody who can maintain some psychological distance from them when they're having that bad day, when things do go wrong (as they will), and who can be their emotional ballast. In a way, then, you should encourage people not only to expect themselves to be gritty, but to recruit someone to be gritty for them in times of crisis, when they have doubts or they're discouraged.

S+B: How does the pursuit of grittiness affect hiring practices?

DUCKWORTH: You cannot guarantee grittiness by hiring someone who

something else about it. It's not the same thing as "play play." I'm interested in understanding that fine line between something that feels effortful and engaging yet aversive, but you do it anyway, and something that is effortful and engaging and just all whipped cream. Kids can play video games for hours, and that's a pretty high cognitive-load activity. But they don't want to work on their algebra for hours.

Is it that gritty people are able to turn work into play? Or are they just able to do the work anyway? I've heard [game designer] Jane McGonigal describe play as the voluntary overcoming of unnecessary obstacles. Is work the voluntary overcoming of necessary obstacles? Or is it that play is when you're succeeding 90 percent of the time, and work is when you're succeeding only 70 percent of the time? There's also the question of consequences. If people are playing World of Warcraft, and you tell them that every time they lose a point you'll take a dollar out of their bank account, but every time their points go up you'll add a dollar, would that make it less fun? Maybe. Then again, perhaps the best we can do is find a mix between work and play that's sustainable. At this stage, what we know conclusively is far less than what we don't know. But we're gritty at our research lab, so we'll keep working on it. +

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