

Article

GOOD TO GREAT THROUGH GRIT

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The conventional wisdom for one's success is often based on how talented one is, with the premise that it is talent – innate, something that you're born with – that will take you places. The obsession with segmenting individual potential based on what they do and what we think they can do is natural as it serves to ease our mental processes in decision-making¹. It is likely that the desire to challenge and confirm our beliefs that led to the birth of multiple testing methods, which aims to explain our attitudes, behaviours, cognitive skills, social abilities, and many others. For instance, in the early 1900s, a form of classifying intelligence based on standardised tests replaced the earlier techniques of behavioural observations. Since then, there are numerous cognitive ability tests that exists, such as the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales², which were initially used to merely identify mental retardation in children but has now expanded to classify one's intelligence.

Given the circumstances, how does one measure talent? Does it require an all-encompassing test that rigorously measures

those who are gifted? Even if it was possible to do so, will it serve to predict whether they would reach their potential compared to others? While it can be argued that talent may mean that the individual achieves success at a faster rate with lower attempt rate, a famed professor of psychology, Angela Duckworth, reasoned that regular individuals who can exercise self-control and perseverance can reach as high as those with natural talents. While there are merits to invest in those who demonstrate potential at an early age based on conventional assessments, there are also additional areas that can be explored to serve as determinants of successful individuals. The premise of this argument is how *grit* – the passion, determination, and perseverance for long-term goals – is powerful in helping one to achieve their potential.

How does one acquire grit? Duckworth offers two ways³. One is that it can be done individually – inside-out. This is done by developing habits of undertaking daily challenges that exceeds one's skills such as writing a sentence, a paragraph, or a page

¹ Daniel Kahneman, Amos Tversky, and Paul Slovic, eds. *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics & Biases*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

² Kirk A. Becker. *History of the Stanford–Binet intelligence scales: Content and psychometrics*. Stanford-Binet Intelligence

Scales, Fifth Edition Assessment Service Bulletin Number 1. 2003

³ Angela Duckworth. *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. Scribner, 2016,

on one day, and waking up the next to further refine those very same phrases until one reaches a level of satisfaction and confidence to share it with others for further improvement. Sharing it with others and getting the right feedback would entail the second way of acquiring grit – the outside-in. When parents, friends, bosses, mentors, and colleagues can provide the right feedback, guidance, support, and challenge to a task, idea, project, serving one to retreat and take in those comments to enhance it further and repeat the process over again, that's a way of grit acquisition. Another way of acquiring grit from inside-out is to connect one's work, task or job to a purpose that is beyond oneself – not solely for monthly salary but towards improvement of a sector or charity, for instance.

Understandably, the inside-out and outside-in tactics are heavily dependent on the individual and the members within the individuals' interpersonal circle. It is dependent on the individual's character (often linked to morality such as integrity, honesty, and trustworthiness) and the environment (such as cultural contexts and path dependency – how one experience shapes another). In “The Road to Character”, the author offers two ways of looking at character⁴, the resume virtues and the eulogy virtues. The former can be summed as what organisations look for in hiring such as self-management and intrapersonal skills. The latter are characteristics such as social intelligence, self-control, and gratitude – the type of

qualities people will remember us for when we depart, hence the terminology. Duckworth goes further to add a third dimension to character – the intellectual virtue – inquisitiveness, curiosity, and enthusiasm for knowledge that encourages open discourse and active engagement on ideas.

These dimensions of character, when relating to grit, could unlock the reason why experts become who they are. It is through persistence in practicing that shifts conscious incompetence to unconscious competence, such as practicing a classical piano piece, perfecting corner kicks during football training, and refining writing skills. The luxury of having personal circles to motivate and the internal drive to better oneself daily is surely one of the ways to reach personal great peaks in our lives. Our social exchanges – at work, at home, within the community – adds further definition to personal selves. To see grit in a religious or even vernacular sense could be in how it is always encouraged for one to keep trying in striving towards success. However, for one to keep trying and to persist, they need to persevere – the essence of grit.

Would grit ever outrank talent? It may. In a world where fixation lies in segmenting information into manageable chunks through tests results, ranks, and metric indices, there is a measurement tool called the Grit Scale⁵, which may provide additional insight into how likely one can reach their potential or go beyond it, with or without talent in the traditional sense. Scales and sense aside, those with grit do not

⁴ David Brooks. *The Road to Character*, Random House: New York, 2015.

⁵ A self-scoring scale that measures how gritty an individual is.

practice marathons to merely win competitions or to break Paula Radcliffe's record. They are constantly training to beat their personal best. Michael Jordan may

believe that "talent wins match and teamwork wins championships", but grit may offer the winning formula for personal and shared success.