



## The Treasure of True Grit

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**T**ell me about a time when you failed, and what you learned from that experience."

Think of the most successful employees you've ever worked with, or the individuals you've mentored who excelled the most, or the leaders you've studied who seem to achieve every goal they set for themselves. Undoubtedly, a common thread between all will be that those individuals have the strength to learn why they failed, what to do in the future to succeed, and the willpower to get back on the horse and try again.

But exactly what is it that leads one person to try again when others just give up?

Industrial and organizational psychologists have spent decades researching this very subject. Angela Duckworth, assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and her research focuses on a personality trait she calls "grit." She defines grit as "sticking with things over the very long term until you master them." She writes that "the gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina."

### Success and Talent

What causes an individual to experience significant success? The obvious answer: success is about talent. Successful people can do *something* – hit a golf ball, dance, trade stocks, write a blog – better than most anyone else. This answer begets another question: What is talent? How did that person get so good at hitting a golf ball or trading stocks? Although talent can appear to be based on inheritance, it turns out that the intrinsic nature of talent may be overrated.

The problem is that a major contradiction exists between how we *measure* talent and the *causes* of talent. In general, we measure talent using tests of maximum performance. Imagine tryouts for most any sports team; players perform in short bursts under conditions of high intensity and motivation. The purpose of the drills is to see what players are capable of and determine their potential. The problem with these drills is that the real world is not set up for short bursts of work ethic under conditions of high motivation. Instead, professional success requires sustained performance, spending hours upon hours perfecting your craft, deliberately and methodically staying the course during times of frustration or exhaustion.

In his book, *Self-Made in America*, John McCormack references a trait studied by Kathy Kolbe: conation. Conation is "the will to succeed, the quest for success, the attitude that 'to stop me you'll have to kill me,' that elusive 'fire in the belly' that manifests itself in drive, enthusiasm, excitement, and single-mindedness in pursuit of a goal – any goal. All consistently successful people have it. Many well-educated, intelligent, enduring, and presentable people don't have it."

### Interviewing for Grit

A segment of the workforce is made up of smart people who aren't high achievers, and others who achieve a lot without having the highest test scores. In one study, Duckworth found that smarter students actually had less grit than their peers who scored lower on an intelligence test. This finding suggests that people who are not as bright as their peers "compensate by working harder and with more determination." And their effort pays off: The grittiest students, not the smartest ones, had the highest GPAs.

So how can we start to understand an applicant's or an employee's grit? Try some or all of these questions to identify the trait:

- What experiences do you feel had the most impact in shaping who you are today?
- Share with me the details of a time when you stayed with an idea or project for longer than anyone expected you to.
- Tell me about some of the obstacles you have had to overcome to reach your present position.
- Give me an example of a time when you had to finish a job even though everyone else had given up.
- Describe a time when you were asked to complete a difficult task or project where the odds were against you. Were you successful? What did you learn from the experience?
- What goal have you had in your life that took you the longest to achieve? What did you learn from that experience?
- Describe how you set your goals for the last year and how you measured your work. Did you achieve your goals? Why or why not?
- Give me an example of a time you made a major sacrifice to achieve an important goal.
- Give me an example of how you have taken control of your career.
- What has been the biggest obstacle you've overcome in life? What about in your career?
- When you found yourself faced with that obstacle, what steps did you take to begin the process of overcoming this challenge?

### Finding People Who Make a Difference®

As a leader, your most important talent is having the ability to be able to identify, attract and secure the best players for your team. People are our most valued asset, and for more than 50 years, Sanford Rose Associates® has been committed to "Finding people who make a difference®" for its clients. To learn more about how we can assist your organization find contributors with grit and conation please reach out to your Sanford Rose Associates® executive search consultant today.

—Karen Schmidt