

BOOK REVIEW

# A Review of "Grit – The Power of Passion and Perseverance"

Angela Duckworth, New York: Scribner (2016)

Review by: Justin Stoddard

Adversity is everywhere and challenging obstacles lurk around every corner. Among other global challenges, COVID-19 caught the world by surprise, and we are doing our best to recover. In *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, Dr. Angela Duckworth presents corporate examples, anecdotes from professional athletes, and her own research demonstrating the power grit has to improve performance. This book reads as both an in-depth exploration into the science behind gritty behavior and a how-to manual providing instruction on building grit both from the inside out, and from the outside in. Among the key concepts discussed by Duckworth, three stood out as particularly pertinent to leader developers. First, in the developmental formula of excellence, effort counts twice as much as, and has greater value than mere talent. Second, is a discussion of learned helplessness versus learned optimism that lies at the root of achievement and overcoming adversity. Third, is the importance of extracurricular activities in developing gritty habits. Each of these are instructive in exploring grit and the role of adversity in character and leadership development at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA).

In the first section exploring the meaning of grit, Duckworth explains that, particularly in sports, achievement is often attributed to natural talent instead of the hours of sustained and “gritty” effort athletes endure to perfect their craft. While talent may explain why an individual engages in a particular activity in the first place, only by combining that talent with deliberate practice can talents develop into skills. This is the first time that effort enters the equation. After these initial skills are developed, effort is required again to refine and transform mere skills into the truly competitive abilities that lead to Olympic-level performance and achievement. In this way, effort counts twice, first in the development of skills and further in the achievement of excellence.

For USAFA cadets, effort plays a critical role as they develop as leaders of character. The rigors of academics combined with the challenges of athletics and discipline of military competence create a uniquely demanding environment. Talent and effort may have helped them develop the skills and achieve goals worthy of acceptance into USAFA. However, only with their continued effort, deliberate practice, and commitment to excellence can they realize the achievement of graduation and a career as officers in the United States Air Force and Space Force.

In the second section, discussing growing grit from the inside out, Duckworth explains the concept of *learned optimism*. Duckworth describes a seminal 1964 experiment conducted by researchers Dr. Marty Seligman and Dr. Steve Maier in which dogs were subject to a series of tests where they received electric shocks. After an initial test was given where some dogs were able to control the shocks, a second test revealed that only one-third of the dogs continually tried to maneuver out of the painful situation while two-thirds of the dogs gave in to the pain, repeatedly enduring the shocks. This led them to compare *learned helplessness*, wherein people who come to believe they cannot control their suffering simply learn to endure it, to *learned optimism*, wherein people continue to push toward relief, resiliently seeking solutions regardless of the adversity. Duckworth provides several examples demonstrating that optimistic people are healthier, stay in school longer, are more satisfied with their marriages, and are higher performers in a variety of industries. Optimists espouse growth mindsets, see failures as opportunities to learn, are grittier when things go wrong, and are more successful and more satisfied with their lives in general.

While some cadets might compare their experience at USAFA to receiving constant shocks, most USAFA graduates understand the purpose of the adversity they faced and recognize the growth they have sustained during their four-year leadership development experience. Internalizing the Air Force core values of Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in All We Do and the corresponding Leader of Character tenets of Living Honorably, Lifting Others, and Elevating Performance requires constant attention, deliberate practice, and commitment to achieve. Optimism enables individuals to suffer setbacks and failures and grow from them instead of adopting the pessimistic attitude leading to stagnation and the mental inability to grow.

In the third section discussing growing grit from the outside in, Duckworth discusses the value of extracurricular activities in addition to regular work to provide opportunities for individuals to engage in challenging experiences and follow through on their commitments. Research demonstrated that those who developed the ability to follow through on their commitments, despite the challenges and obstacles they faced, experienced greater success in both personal and professional life pursuits. Evidence also suggests that people who learn to do hard things, become better at doing other hard things as they develop gritty habits of overcoming challenges and achieving goals.

The Academy's Leader of Character Framework guides efforts in the development of cadets as leaders prepared to serve the Air Force. This developmental process happens through a process of assessing their strengths and weaknesses, finding ways to challenge them to discover and grow, and then supporting them in their development. For cadets, numerous military, athletic, academic, and club activities serve as the battlefield wherein this development occurs. For others, it may extend into their homes, at work, in their communities, schools, churches, and other areas that provide engagement opportunities and experiences. In an age where "social distancing" has become the norm, we need social engagement more than ever, and that provides the classroom for our own growth and development.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who is seeking to increase their ability to overcome adversity and thrive despite the global challenges that surround us. Learning to be at peace in the eye of the storm is something that requires perspective, patience, and insight. Duckworth's use of evidence-based research, personal stories and anecdotes, and professional examples throughout a variety of industries clearly demonstrates how grit elevates performance and

achieves excellence regardless of context. This is a message that cadets at USAFA, and people throughout the world need more than ever before. Everyone can develop grit and learn to face the adversity that can lead to our own personal growth should we choose to walk that path.

♦ ♦ ♦