



GRIT (AKA MENTAL TOUGHNESS): AN ESSENTIAL TRAIT FOR SUCCESSFUL TECH LEADERS

— BY NATHALIE HEYNDERICKX —

Being gritty, along with adopting sound self-care strategies, is now a must-have requirement for successful tech leaders.

In a post-pandemic world in which the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) reality has been taken to a whole new level, grit has become an indispensable leadership trait. Tech teams are in the spotlight and are expected to deliver change, fast. The great resignation not only invited us to reflect on our core values, but also exacerbated the tech war for talent. Economies are uncertain. Workplaces are shifting. Norms are being challenged. Disruptions are constant. Time is compressed. Energy management is a concern for most teams. The risk of burnout has

increased significantly, and it is now hitting C-level IT executives.

BACKGROUND

The term 'mental toughness' emerged in the context of sports training to describe a set of attributes that allows a person to cope with difficult situations and emerge without losing confidence. The term 'grit' was coined by Angela



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Duckworth¹ as a result of her extensive research that revealed that grit, not IQ, is a predictor of success in many demanding fields.

WHAT IS GRIT?

In Duckworth's words, grit is having passion for, and perseverance in, very long-term goals. It's about having stamina and sticking to your future – not just for the week, and not just for the month, but for years and working really hard to make that future a reality. Grit is about sustained, consistent effort towards a goal even when we struggle, falter or temporarily fail.

GRIT VERSUS RESILIENCE

Resilience can be defined as our ability to bounce back from adversity. It requires a certain degree of grounded optimism and hope. Some people are more resilient than others. Like grit, resilience is a characteristic that can be developed.

Author Kori D. Miller offers this definition: 'Grit is the engine that moves us toward our goal. Resilience is the oil that keeps the engine moving.'

THE FIVE ELEMENTS OF GRIT

Various studies have shown that perseverance is an essential quality for success in life. It often tops aptitude and raw talent, and it is a more accurate predictor of achievement. Duckworth herself is the first to say that the essence of grit remains elusive; but the five common characteristics of grit listed below can make things clearer.

- 1. Courage:** You might have heard that courage is like a muscle – it must be exercised daily. Think about your ability to manage the fear of failure as an imperative and a predictor of success. The supremely gritty are not afraid to tank, but rather embrace failure as part of a process. They understand that there are valuable lessons in defeat, and that the vulnerability of perseverance is a requisite for high achievement.
- 2. Conscientiousness:** Conscientiousness is defined as the personality trait of being thorough, careful or vigilant. Generally, the conscientious have strong moral principles and values; they want to do the right thing, and their opinions and beliefs on any subject are rarely held lightly. The conscientious person is dedicated to work and is capable of intense, single-minded effort.

¹ Duckworth is a distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, CEO of Character Lab and author of *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. She is a former McKinsey Management Consultant and her TED talk is among the most viewed of all time (over one million views).

- 3. Excellence:** In general, gritty people don't seek perfection, but instead strive for excellence. Excellence is an attitude, not an end game. The word 'excellence' parallels the Greek word *arete*, which is bound with the notion of fulfilment of purpose and is closely associated with virtue. Excellence is far more forgiving than perfectionism, allowing and embracing failure and vulnerability in the ongoing quest for improvement.
- 4. Perseverance:** Malcolm Gladwell, in his bestselling book *Outliers*, notes some similarities among the best of the best (think The Beatles, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs), such as the setting of clear goals and lots of practice – typically more than 10,000 hours – to master their craft. Gladwell suggests that time and perseverance are vital for success.
- 5. Resilience:** In their book *Resilience, Why Things Bounce Back*, Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy define resilience as 'the ability of people, communities, and systems to maintain their core purpose and integrity among unforeseen shocks and surprises'. Gritty people believe that 'everything will be all right in the end, and if it is not all right, it is not the end'.

OUR STORY, VALUES AND PURPOSE: THE FUEL FOR GRIT

According to Shannon Huffman Polson, the first woman to fly the Apache attack helicopter in the US Army and the founder of The Grit Institute, grit starts with our ability to own our story – in other words, our ability to look back at our past to uncover our core values and reveal our purpose, which can be used as raw material to reshape our narrative. Polson's belief is that each leader has control of their own story. It does not matter what is handed to us – we get to shape that material and decide our trajectory. Leaders must know their purpose to navigate well in times of change and uncertainty. A leadership crucible experience can help leaders to find this purpose.

LEADERSHIP CRUCIBLES

Extraordinary leaders find meaning and learn from the most negative events. Like a phoenix rising from ashes, leaders emerge from adversity stronger, more confident in themselves and their purpose, and more committed to their work. Such transformative events are called crucibles: a severe test or trial. Crucibles are intense, often dramatic and always unplanned.

Crucibles force leaders into deep self-reflection in which they might examine their values or question their assumptions. They can take many forms. Some are violent, life-threatening events; others are more prosaic episodes of self-doubt. Regardless of the crucible's nature,



HOW GRITTY ARE YOU?

We are all born with different levels of grit, but Duckworth believes that it is a trait we can build through experience.

Find out your grit score in less than five minutes by completing the survey designed by Angela Duckworth.

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successful leaders can create a narrative around it – a story about how they were challenged, and how they met the challenge and became better leaders.

The word ‘crucible’ refers to the vessel that medieval alchemists used in their attempt to turn their base metals into gold. By definition, a crucible is a catalyst for transformation through which an individual comes to a new or altered sense of identity.

GROWTH MINDSET

One effective way to increase your grit factor is by cultivating a growth mindset.²

A growth mindset is about being dedicated to hard work, effort, persistence and curiosity, while learning and seeking new challenges. A growth mindset can be learnt. It helps people to be motivated and to succeed. People with a growth mindset hold the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts; the hand you’re dealt in life is just a starting point for your development. Those with growth mindsets relish moments of failure, as they provide obstacles and challenges that offer opportunities to grow and develop. ●

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² *The Fixed and Growth Mindset theory was developed by Dr Carol Dweck, PhD, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University.*

automotive and FMCG. She is currently an Executive Coach for tech leaders, a Lecturer of Positive Psychology at Monash Business School, and a Facilitator at the Australian Institute of Management. She is also the author of *The Mindful CIO Manifesto* and the creator of The Mindful CIO Community (mindfulcio.community).

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