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Unlocking Potential: Developing Gritty Employees through a Growth Mindset

4 Steps to Cultivate Grit in Your Team

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Executive Summary

The professional landscape of the twenty-first century presents a dynamic set of challenges and opportunities for organizations. With these evolving demands and within a persistently uncertain business landscape, the need for a resilient and perseverant workforce has never been more pronounced. Central to this resilience and perseverance is the quality of grit, which can be defined as a combination of passion and perseverance for achieving long-term goals (Ris, 2015). In a workplace context, this quality translates to an employee's determination to overcome challenges, adapt to changing circumstances, and remain steadfast in the pursuit of organizational objectives.

Organizations stand to gain significantly from cultivating grit among their employee bases. Gritty employees are not only tenacious but also contribute to a culture of resilience and commitment (Mooradian et al., 2016). Such employees tend to remain loyal to their organizations, seek continuous improvement, and are less likely to stress under pressure (Jordan et al., 2018). This improved dedication translates into tangible benefits at the organizational level, including increased productivity, decreased turnover rates, and an overall positive influence on organizational outcomes (Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014; Jordan et al., 2018; Meriac et al., 2015).

To understand the roots of grit, we must turn to the field of positive psychology. This framework underscores the importance of a growth mindset and psychological well-being in nurturing and sustaining qualities including grit and resilience. With a growth mindset, individuals perceive challenges as opportunities for growth rather than as insurmountable barriers (Dweck, 2006). Growth-oriented individuals learn from setbacks and view them as stepping stones instead of stumbling blocks. Integrating principles from positive psychology into organizational practices can be instrumental in fostering an environment conducive to a growth mindset and the development of grit.

This white paper explores the relationship between grit, growth mindset, and positive psychology and how organizations can help foster these combined qualities within their own organizational cultures. This discussion culminates in four concrete steps that organizational leaders can take to begin cultivating grit and a growth mindset in their teams, helping pave the way for sustained organizational success.

Introduction to Grit

Grit is a relatively new concept in the field of psychology, though it has quickly gained popularity and become the subject of a growing body of research. University of Pennsylvania psychologist Angela Duckworth is the leading researcher on grit, which she defines grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1087). This relentless dedication to long-term achievement, even in the face of challenges and failures, has been found to be a better predictor of success than broader quantifications of "talent" or "intelligence" (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Through numerous research studies, Duckworth and her colleagues have found that grit strongly predicts success in a variety of domains, including career success, academic achievement, and athletic performance (e.g., Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Eskreis-Winkler et al., 2014).

Characteristics of Gritty Individuals

Through the expanded research of Duckworth and colleagues, she has come to identify four main characteristics of gritty individuals (Duckworth, 2016):

Passion
Gritty people are passionate about their goals and are willing to put in the hard work necessary to achieve them. In the corporate environment, passion manifests as a consistent and deep commitment to one's work, role, and/or the mission of the organization. For instance, an executive might have a relentless drive to elevate the company's brand in the industry, and this passion becomes a guiding light in their decisions and strategies over the years.

Perseverance
Gritty individuals are able to persevere, or continue persisting forward, in the face of setbacks and challenges. At the organizational level, an employee demonstrating perseverance might be someone who continues to tackle a challenging project despite initial failures, believing in its eventual success and the value it will bring to the company.

Self-efficacy
In alignment with Bandura's (1977) concept of self-efficacy, Duckworth finds that gritty individuals possess a firm belief in their ability to persevere and achieve long-term goals despite setbacks. An employee with both grit and self-efficacy doesn't merely hope or wish for success; they steadfastly believe in their capacity to achieve it through sustained effort and adaptability.

Hope
Gritty individuals possess a positive outlook on the future and believe that their goals are achievable. Duckworth posits that gritty people persist because they believe that their efforts matter and can lead to a better outcome. In the workplace, a gritty employee exhibiting hope would consistently believe in the potential of positive change, even in the face of setbacks. This type of hope is proactive, not passive. Gritty employees don't just hope things will get better; they actively engage in making them better, driven by the belief that their actions can lead to positive change.

Recognizing and nurturing grit among employees is not just about applauding hard work. It involves valuing and fostering a deep-seated commitment to long-term objectives combined with an unyielding spirit to persevere against the odds. By doing so, organizations can cultivate a culture of resilience and sustained excellence, driving their team collectively forward even in the face of challenges.

Grit Example

Mariah is a gritty team leader who heads up the information technology (IT) department at a large hospital. She is leading the implementation of a new patient management software. Mariah remains committed to the project's vision even when initial rollouts receive lukewarm reception from certain internal teams. Mariah works tirelessly with her team to iterate and improve. Her grit and perseverance ultimately lead to a successful new software implementation with high levels of adoption across the organization.

Research on Grit in the Workplace

Recent research has explored how grit is directly associated with performance, success, and adaptability, especially in organizational settings. Several of these studies have found a correlation between grit and job performance, or one's ability to excel at their assigned job responsibilities.

Lucas et al.'s research (2015) found that grit was a significant predictor of job performance among working adults. Employees with grit were more likely to have high levels of job performance compared to other personality traits like conscientiousness and being extraverted. Specifically studying the concept of "costly perseverance," the researchers documented how grit leads individuals to persevere even when there are significant costs or challenges involved. This level of tenacity can lead to breakthroughs in challenging work projects or situations that ultimately benefit the greater organization.

Grit is also associated with improved job satisfaction and attitudes. In their study of municipal council workers in the U.S., Jordan et al. (2018) found a connection between gritty employees and higher job satisfaction, work effort, and organizational citizenship behavior. They also found that gritty employees had lower turnover intentions compared to less gritty colleagues.

Grit has proven to be especially valuable for individuals in high-pressure professions. For example, in healthcare, Underdahl et al. (2017) explored the link between physician resilience, grit, and retention, concluding that grittier physicians exhibit higher resilience and are more likely to remain in their roles compared to peers with less grit. These higher retention levels of gritty physicians help contribute to greater levels of organizational stability.

Exploring the characteristic of grit among employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, Lee (2022) research found that organizations with gritty employees had higher organizational performance levels. In addition, they identified two supporting factors to developing and maintaining gritty employees: (a) a supportive organizational environment, and (b) the presence of transformational leadership.

The potential of grit to enhance individual worker performance and contribute to improved organizational outcomes is great. Positive psychology has proven to be an effective avenue for interventions and programs to help foster this critical characteristic in employees.

The Interplay between Grit and Positive Psychology

Positive psychology, often described as the scientific study of human strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive, holds significant potential for business leaders aiming to cultivate a gritty workforce. By understanding and leveraging the principles of positive psychology alongside a growth mindset approach, leaders can foster grit among employees, helping enhance both individual and organizational performance.

First, it is important to connect the dots between grit and positive psychology. Duckworth's (2016) foundational work on grit places a significant emphasis on passion and perseverance towards long-term goals. But beyond sheer determination and commitment, there is a deeper connection between grit, resilience, and overall well-being:

- Resilience, which is often explored within the positive psychology paradigm, refers to an individual's capacity to quickly recover from setbacks and adversities.
- Psychological capital (PsyCap) encompasses hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Luthans et al., 2007, 2015).

These positive psychological resources interweave with the concept of grit, particularly resilience, which directly complements the perseverance aspect of grit. When employees possess both grit and resilience, they do not merely strive towards their goals, but they also experienced improved well-being due to their ability to face challenges head-on and successfully recover from those challenges (Luthans et al., 2007, 2015).

The Role of Mindset in Developing and Sustaining Grit

Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck is the leading researcher on growth mindset, providing a transformative perspective on how individuals perceive challenges and potential.

Dweck (2006) found that people have one of two mindset types: a fixed mindset and a growth mindset:

- **People with a fixed mindse**t act as if their intelligence and talents are fixed traits. Though they may not be conscious of this mindset, their behaviors suggest that they do not believe they have the capacity to change their talents or skillsets, and they are thus less willing to put in effort to try to change.
- **People with a growth mindset** believe that their intelligence and talents are adaptable traits. They believe that they can improve their intelligence and talents through hard work and effort.

While most people do not self-identify as having a fixed mindset, this mindset is apparent based on how such individuals behave and the decisions they make around personal and professional development. There is a profound difference in perspective between these two types of mindsets. Adopting a growth mindset is the foundation for self-growth and personal development of any individual looking to develop themselves on a personal or professional level.

> *Growth mindset is the belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort, training, and perseverance.* – *Carol Dweck*

A growth mindset dovetails perfectly with the grit framework. When employees believe that their skills are not static but can be honed and improved upon, they are more likely to show sustained effort in the face of obstacles. This intrinsic belief in the potential for growth directly fuels and sustains grit.

By promoting a growth mindset in the workplace, leaders can encourage employees to view setbacks not as failures, but as opportunities for growth and learning. This perspective, in turn, nurtures and reinforces the gritty determination to push forward, even when faced with challenges.

A growth mindset is associated with a number of positive outcomes, including career success, academic achievement, and athletic performance (Dweck, 2006; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Importantly, research has demonstrated that a growth mindset can be cultivated through workplace interventions (Dweck, 2006).

For business leaders, understanding the intricate interplay between grit, positive psychology, and a growth mindset offers a powerful toolkit to cultivate a resilient and high-performing workforce. By promoting well-being, resilience, and a belief in growth, organizations can foster a culture where employees are not just gritty but also thrive both personally and professionally—and in turn, contribute to a high-performing organization.

4 Steps to Cultivate Grit in Employees

Beginning the work to foster grit and a growth mindset among your employees may be simpler than you think. We recommend approaching the process one step at a time, and incrementally developing a more comprehensive program for building gritty employees. These four steps will help your organization lay a solid foundation for ongoing grit-building and growth mindset initiatives among your employees.

Step 1: Incorporate Grit Development into Employee Orientation Programs

Employee orientation programs present an excellent opportunity to introduce new employees to the company's culture and values. Use these initial introductions to your organizational culture to teach employees about the importance of grit, why you value it at your organization, and how employees can work to develop it.

Here are some concrete actions that businesses can take to incorporate grit development into employee orientation programs:

> ### *Building Grit into Employee Orientation Programs*
>
> *Teach employees about the importance of grit.* Explain to employees what grit is and why it is important for success. Incorporate a brief sketch and act out what grit looks like in your company.
>
> *Share success stories of people who have demonstrated grit.* These successes can be from within your organization or industry, or stories of more well-known individuals. Hearing about other people's successes can help employees see that grit is a real and attainable quality.
>
> *Provide employees with opportunities to practice grit.* This could include role-playing or being assigned challenging tasks as part of training exercises.
>
> *Celebrate employees' successes.* Celebrating successes right off the bat during the initial training period will help employees to feel proud of their early accomplishments and motivated to continue developing their grit.

By taking these actions, businesses can help employees begin developing grit to help them find sustained success in the workplace.

Finally, make sure to build grit-focused assessments and goal-setting processes into the orientation program. Give each employee time to meet with their supervisor and identify initial goals and growth areas to prioritize as they get settled into their new roles. Each individual should walk away from the orientation with a clear understanding of areas to focus on for improving their grit, resilience, and growth mindset—and feeling motivated and optimistic about their ability to achieve these goals.

Step 2: Provide Growth-Oriented Feedback

Once you have identified the areas of improvement for your employees, it is important to continually provide them with feedback that will help them grow. Make sure this feedback is specific, constructive, and actionable. Keep it focused on the employee's development, rather than their performance. Some tips for providing growth-oriented feedback include:

Growth-Oriented Feedback Tips

Be specific. When providing feedback, be as specific as possible about what the employee is doing well and what they could improve on. This will help the employee understand exactly what they need to do to change their behavior.

Be constructive. Be constructive, not destructive. Focus on helping the employee to improve with specific suggestions, rather than criticizing them in a negative manner.

Be actionable. Make feedback actionable, giving the employee specific action steps they can take to improve their performance.

Focus on development. Focus on the employee's development instead of their performance. Keep your focus on helping the employee to learn and grow, rather than simply telling them what they are doing wrong.

Let's look at some concrete examples of how to provide growth-oriented feedback:

- **Feedback on a presentation** - "I noticed that you were able to stay calm under pressure during that presentation. That's a great skill to have. One area for improvement beyond that is to work to avoid using filler statements such as 'like' or 'um.'"
- **Feedback on team communication** - "I appreciate that you always have a lot to say and contribute. I think you could improve your communication skills by being more concise and to the point."
- **Feedback on customer interaction** - "I'm impressed with the way you were able to handle that difficult customer. You showed a lot of patience and understanding. I encourage you to bring in a manager to help back you up if you feel like you are not being respected."
- **Feedback on task management and meeting deadlines** - "I notice you have missed a couple of deadlines recently. I think you could improve your time management skills by setting priorities and sticking to a schedule."

By providing growth-oriented feedback, you can keep your employees encouraged and focused on growth while guiding them to develop the skills they need to succeed in the workplace.

Step 3: Intentionally Foster Grit in Emerging Leaders and Executives

Perhaps more than entry-level employees, emerging leaders and executives need grit to succeed and continue growing in their careers. As they strive to advance in their profession, aspiring leaders will confront many challenges and setbacks that they will need to overcome in order to achieve their goals. Possessing grit will help them successfully overcome these challenges without derailing their larger career objectives. Organizations that support their high-potential leaders in fostering grit can enhance their internal recruitment and employee advancement efforts.

Consider pursuing these efforts to begin building grit into your employee development:

- Incorporate growth mindset and resilience concepts in learning and development opportunities. Offer seminars, workshops, and other learning opportunities with a specific focus on growth mindset. Consider exploring positive psychology programs that are purpose-built for the corporate environment.
- Include grit as a topic in mentorship initiatives with new and seasoned employees. Mentors can help mentees to develop grit by providing them with support, guidance, and encouragement.
- Include grit and positive psychology aspects as part of leadership development programs. Focused leadership development programs can teach emerging leaders and executives about the importance of grit and how to develop it. Group and individual coaching by a practitioner trained in positive psychology can support these efforts.

By exploring these initial initiatives, businesses can help their emerging leaders and executives to develop the grit they need to succeed in the organization long term.

Step 4: Create a Challenging Yet Supportive Environment

A challenging yet supportive environment is one that provides employees with the opportunity to learn and grow, while also giving individuals the support and resources they need to succeed. This type of environment can be created by setting high but attainable standards, offering resources for overcoming obstacles, and deliberately recognizing and celebrating perseverance and effort.

- Set High But Attainable Standards: Provide employees with goals that are challenging enough to motivate them, but not so challenging that they become discouraged. When employees are able to achieve their goals, it boosts their confidence and motivation and helps them build upon their growth over time.
- Offer Resources for Overcoming Obstacles: This could include providing employees with access to training, development opportunities, or mentorship programs. Offer professional development stipends to attend conferences or seminars, and access to online learning platforms. By providing employees with the resources they need to succeed, you are showing them that you believe in their ability to achieve their goals.

- Deliberately Recognize and Celebrate Perseverance and Effort: Recognizing achievements and celebrating wins, perseverance, and effort is a cornerstone of any growth mindset program. This means acknowledging employees for their hard work and dedication, even when they do not achieve their goals. When employees feel appreciated for their efforts, it motivates them to continue working hard.

Here are some additional ideas for creating a challenging yet supportive environment:

Creating a Challenging & Supportive Work Environment

- Provide employees with opportunities to take on new challenges
- Encourage employees to collaborate with each other
- Create a culture of learning and continuous improvement
- Provide employees with feedback on their performance
- Celebrate successes and learn from failures.

By creating a challenging yet supportive environment, you can help your employees to reach their full potential.

Building Grittier Employees

Grit is an essential quality for success in today's business landscape. Comprising passion and perseverance, grit stands as a cornerstone for individual and organizational success. But while cultivating grit in employees is important, it is equally crucial to recognize the nuances of its application.

Balancing high expectations with genuine support for your employees is essential. This involves a delicate dance that ensures employees are not overwhelmed but are instead empowered, helping nurture their grit, resilience, and determination over time. During this process, it's also important to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach, which can be counterproductive. Each employee's journey is unique and requires a personalized approach to supporting their development. Recognizing and respecting that individuality can further your efforts toward fostering grit and resilience.

Keep in mind that the journey to build grit and a growth mindset into your organizational culture doesn't require sweeping changes overnight. Start small following the steps that we outlined, and you will begin to lay a solid foundation that you can build upon and refine over time.

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About Consulting Solutions, LLC

Consulting Solutions is a business consulting firm based in Minneapolis, Minnesota that offers services informed by the science of psychology. The business principal, Yvonne Kinney, is a Business Psychologist and PhD who researches individual, group, and organizational behaviors and dynamics in the workplace with the goal of better understanding how people think and interact with one another for positive business results. Her firm works with organizations to understand the individual psychology of employees, enabling them to support and develop their employees, hire intelligently, expand and grow, improve staff performance, enhance leadership effectiveness, and ultimately, achieve organizational goals faster.

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