

Grit: Just because you haven't given up, doesn't mean you have to grind it out

By Dana Cogan with Andrea Konuma

Are you keeping your nose to the grindstone?

Most people know the value of hard work. So it's not surprising that when achievement-oriented people are dissatisfied with their performance, they usually ask themselves, 'Could I be working harder?' And the answer is usually 'Yes.' There's always another hour to carve out of sleeping time, family time, eating time or some other time to grind out a little more work. Moreover, in spite of the supposed shift to performance-based evaluation systems, most organizations tacitly (or openly) recognize and reward you for keeping your nose to the grindstone. Grinding may not actually help you hit your targets, but managers, colleagues and even customers are generally more sympathetic when they can see that you knocked yourself out trying.

Grit: Perseverance with Passion and Purpose

Given a choice, though, most of us would rather not resort to grinding it out too often because it gets to be, well, a grind. But is there an alternative? Psychology Today recently ran a collection of articles on grit - perseverance in the face of ongoing obstacles. It seems that people with a high capacity for perseverance tend to be more successful than the rest of us. It isn't exactly revolutionary to declare that stick-to-itiveness is a key ingredient of success. Edison's 98% perspiration principle has been around for quite some time and who hasn't heard of the Protestant work ethic? More recently, Jim Collins described 'professional will' as one of the attributes shared by CEOs who lead their organizations to great results. Perseverance clearly has its merits.

Still, even a combination of hard work and perseverance doesn't seem to guarantee success. After all, a lot of people grind it out for years and years on end, but not all of these people deliver top performance with any sort of consistency. Indeed, many just grind themselves down. Those with grit and those who grind both persevere, and both work hard, but grit involves more than keeping your nose to the grindstone:

- Gritty people have real passion for their goals because they set goals that are worthy of their passion. They set goals that are high enough and meaningful enough to bring out their passion on an ongoing basis; this seems to reduce the feeling that working toward those goals is a grind. This resonates with Collins' assertion that great companies take on Big Hairy Audacious

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Goals. In some cases, it's almost like the goal they have chosen is so compelling that it comes back to haunt them (in a positive way). They may get tired or even feel like giving up on the goal for a while, but then they feel an urge or impulse to try again.

- Gritty people are self-driven. They take initiative in moving toward their goals now, rather than falling into the trap of waiting for the perfect time to start. Despite the daily demands of life and work that distract them from their goals, they find small steps they can take to get them a little bit closer. And they take those steps. Self-driven is the positive twin of self-disciplined, which connotes the ability to resist temptation. The ability to resist bad stuff (chocolate chip cookies notwithstanding) is a good thing, but it doesn't seem to stoke the fire like striving for the good stuff does.

- Gritty people don't give up on the future, even when prospects look dim. Their capacity to continue trying does not come from a rosy belief that success will come easily or quickly. Rather, it comes from a belief that they will eventually find an answer if they have the gumption to keep looking for one. This pragmatic optimism resonates with Collins' claim that great CEOs acknowledge tough conditions in the present, but also refuse to stop believing that they are capable of making a better future.

- Gritty people know when to keep their nose to the grindstone and when to keep their eyes up scanning the horizon for opportunities. Their commitment to their goals drives gritty people to constantly look for a new angle or a better way to make realizing those goals. Their commitment is to getting to their destination, rather than to a specific way of getting there. When things get tough, they don't throw the baby out with the bath water. However, they are willing to throw out the bathwater, soap, shampoo, scrub brush, rubber ducky and even the bathtub if that is what it takes to get the baby clean.

Grind dictates that you keep your head down and keep doing the same thing until you get it right. Grit dictates that you pull your head up and keep trying different approaches until you get to the goal.

Gritty people do not grind it out so much as they just plain refuse to give up on their goals. They do whatever has to be done to keep going through hard times, and this certainly includes grinding it out as necessary. But the grinding is a means to an end, not the

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end itself. Grinding is something they do while they search for the right opportunities, and they frequently raise their heads to look around for those opportunities. They know that when their noses are down, their eyes are down too, and when their eyes are down, they might be missing something that could help them achieve their real goals. When they see an opportunity, they take some kind of action, even if that action is radically different from what they are used to. It doesn't have to be a large action, just enough to enable them to test the new opportunity and judge whether it deserves some of their effort. They know that hard work can be a means to an end, but they also are careful not allow themselves to fall into the trap of persevering merely for the sake of perseverance.

Do you feel gritty?

Next time you find you are not getting the results you hoped for even though feel like you are working pretty hard, you might ask yourself some of the following questions to decide if have fallen into a grind or if you are persevering with grit:

- Do my objectives mean something to me? Are they big enough to keep my attention and pull me along even when I stumble? Do they pop into my mind even when I have forgotten them in the course of the daily grind?
- Do I own my work or do I feel as though it forced upon me? Could I reframe my goals and actions to make even the grind aspects of my current situation more meaningful?
- Do I regularly set aside time to focus on and take a few actions that will bring me closer to realizing the goals I really care about? Do I support this by grinding as necessary on other things that keep me going while I look for ways to reach my goal?
- Do I believe my important goals are possible, even if they seem like a pipedream to others? Do I have a way to remind myself that I am getting closer to those goals, even when they still seem to be a million miles away?

And most important:

- Do I pull my head up from the grindstone periodically to scan for opportunities that pop up along the way? And when I recognize

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a new opportunity, am I flexible enough to give up an old idea or way of doing things so I can test the new opportunity?

If your answers to some of these questions are negative, they may provide some clues as what to change to move from grind to grit. If your answers are positive, the odds are you currently have a high capacity to persevere until you reach your destination. On top of that, since grit seems to correspond with greatness, it may be only a matter of time before your grit enables you to lead those around you to greatness as well.

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Good to Great, Jim Collins, Harper Business 2001