

Grit: The Power of Passion & Perseverance by Knowledge@Wharton

What is grit? Angela Duckworth, a psychology professor at University of Pennsylvania's School of Arts and Sciences, says it is the capacity to work hard and stay focused. In her recent book, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, she explains why grit is necessary in addition to talent, and why talent needs the drive that grit provides in order for one to be successful. Duckworth, a 2013 MacArthur Fellow, discussed her ideas on the Knowledge@Wharton show on Wharton Business Radio on SiriusXM channel 111. (Listen to the podcast at the top of this page.)

An edited transcript of the conversation follows.

Knowledge@Wharton: Could you talk about grit affecting our successes? Where did the idea have its genesis?

Angela Duckworth: I could date it back to being a teacher, teaching math in the New York City public schools and seeing many kids. Just by sitting next to them and talking to them at lunch time, you knew they were smart enough to learn everything that you needed to teach them, but still weren't succeeding [and] weren't fulfilling that potential. I could date my interest in grit to that point, but it would be probably more complete if I dated it to childhood. I grew up with a father who was obsessed with achievement and I think I may [have] modeled or inherited an interest in what makes people successful from him.

Knowledge@Wharton: But taking a job in the New York Public School system after working in a corporate community required a little bit of grit in itself, correct?

Duckworth: Yes. the decision in some ways looked like a left turn or a detour. But in many ways, it was getting back to what was more meaningful to me as a person. I had spent my entire college career working with kids and the community in my spare time. Right after college, I started a summer school for low-income children and ran that full-time for two years. So in some ways, maybe the corporate world was the digression.

"Whatever your talent, you have to engage to realize that talent. We all have seen talent wasted."

Knowledge@Wharton: Does it mean that maybe we need to have a little bit of philosophy in how we teach in schools and maybe what we see in schools?

Duckworth: As somebody that studies an individual's capacity to work very hard and stay focused on things that matter to them, I would like to say, "Yes, a change in focus," but maybe not the change in focus that most people would think I mean.

Many times, I hear, “If it really matters how hard you work, I’m going to put the responsibility on the shoulders of these kids. And if they don’t do well, it’s even more their fault than I used to think.” That’s exactly the wrong message. As educators and all of us in society, when a kid is not focused and when they are not achieving, the first question is, “What are we doing that isn’t actually working?”

The idea is: Can we be more psychologically wise about what we teach and how we teach? In fact, it rarely is exerting kids to work harder.

Knowledge@Wharton: Talent is obviously a factor in this, but sometimes, it’s not always talent. It has to be more the drive to be able to reach your goals.

Duckworth: It’s not that talent doesn’t matter. I believe that talent exists. Some people prefer a world where we’re all equally talented in everything. Whether you prefer that world or not, I don’t think that world exists. But whatever your talent, you have to engage to realize that talent. We all have seen talent wasted. The engagement, the effort matters enormously.

“Drive can be encouraged by a wonderful teacher, an awesome soccer team — and it can be squashed as well.”

When people think of the word “drive,” they often think you have it or you don’t, and that’s where we’re wrong. Drive is something that can be encouraged by a wonderful teacher, by a terrific classroom environment, by an awesome soccer team that you are on, and it can be squashed as well.

Knowledge@Wharton: Several people talk about grit being something that you have. You may even be born with it. But you say in your book that this is something that also can be learned.

Duckworth: The “also” is crucial. People have always been asking, “Is it nature or nurture?” Are you born with it or do you develop it? The answer is, “Absolutely both.” It would be naive to discount the role of genes. But there’s also an enormous role for the people around them to nurture that nature. The real question is, what can we do with our genes, whatever they are, to be our best self?

Knowledge@Wharton: Data will prove whether or not this is proof of future success than, say, the SAT or an IQ test.

Duckworth: I will draw from the research of Jim Heckman, an economist at the University of Chicago. We collaborate closely. He has probably done the most comprehensive work on human capital and what predicts achievement in as many domains as you can name — crime, employment, relationships, stability, income or wealth.

Jim Heckman would say that what’s clear is that in the 20th century, economists thought it was largely a cognitive ability or IQ, and in the 21st century, we’re realizing that these “non-IQ” [factors] or your “character strengths” matter at least as much. Many things matter other than our measured intelligence, so let’s get to work on them.

Knowledge@Wharton: So it’s that next level of learning in society that we’re putting in

because we're in this timeframe where the data and the information are as important as the process itself?

Duckworth: Yes, one could argue that the 20th century's major step forward was the semiconductor, because that led to computers. Now, information — like what you're dispensing right now, talking to each other — is free. So, there are no more barriers to entry to knowledge. What will be the semiconductor of the 21st century? My argument is that the 'semiconductor' of the 21st century will be a solution to understanding behavior and behavior change.

Knowledge@Wharton: In terms of passing this information onto students or corporations, what's the most important thing for them to understand about the difference between grit and talent? There's probably a large difference between the two and how that can affect your future success.

Duckworth: Well, as Wharton students probably know already, people in business use the word "talent" in different ways. Sometimes HR or the CEO who's looking for a new hire uses it broadly to mean everything they're looking for — just everything. Other people use it more narrowly, including me. I define talent as the rate at which you get better at something when you try. To be very talented means you get better faster and more easily than other people or other things that you try.

"The 'semiconductor' of the 21st century will be a solution to understanding behavior and behavior change."

Effort is your engagement. It's the quality and the quantity of your engagement ruminatively over time. They multiply, if you will, to produce skill, and once you've got a skill and you can do something — you can write well, you can present well, or you're good at solving problems.

It's the doers I most admire. As you think about yourself, you think, "What are my talents? What are the things that I'm going to be able to sustain effort in over the long term?" In general, that second question is answered more by your interests and your values than by things like salary.

[Consider] my job. It's not that there aren't headaches, or that there aren't disappointments, but to love what you do requires a level of intrinsic interest. The only thing I want to encourage young people about this is, if you introspect a bit and you think, "Wait, I don't have a passion," and you're panicking, just realize that it develops over time.

Knowledge@Wharton: More and more entrepreneurs and people are following that passion. You may go to work on Wall Street or in a hospital or as a lawyer for a few years, but you make that career shift and follow something else that you have a love for.

Duckworth: The most successful people in life are following something that they could say, "I love what I do." Most people can't say, "Oh, I love what I do because I make a lot of money or I love what I do because there are free snacks in the kitchen." Free snacks are great. But loving what you do is a special kind of happiness.

“I define talent as the rate at which you get better at something when you try.”

Knowledge@Wharton: You say in your book about when you were teaching in New York City and at times you were distracted by the talent of some of the kids.

Duckworth: When you are working with young people and trying to teach them something, that isn't just classroom teachers. So many of us are in that mentoring role. [When we're] trying to teach a young person something new, we can get easily frustrated by the kids who are not picking it up as quickly as we hoped they would or thought they should.

I would often chalk up their lack of learning to their inability, to their lack of talent. Now, I would say that the question should have been, “What am I not doing here as a teacher? How is it that I can get them to learn faster?” It's extremely unproductive to just lay the burden and the blame at the foot of the student. It's almost always the case that the teacher could do something differently or better.

Knowledge@Wharton: Do you think we're going to see a shift in education because of the understanding that this has to be a factor in success for kids growing up?

Duckworth: Yes, I hope there's a tectonic shift in how we think about learning. We should think about it as something that we do all the time that is massively influenced by our circumstances and not just by some level of innate ability that we think we can't change.

Even that is untrue. Your ability to learn is something that changes and depends on your opportunities and your experiences. At the same time, I would urge caution. When we swing wildly from one point of view to another and we think, “Oh, well, grit is the answer to everything and it's all” — that's got to be wrong, too. It's got to be that we are judicious and say, “Okay, well, we're learning something new here, but let's not get ahead of ourselves, let's not, for example, assume that Dr. Duckworth knows everything [about] how to change grit, which Dr. Duckworth does not.”

“When you read Warren Buffet's annual letters, you think — this guy is a world-class psychologist.”

Knowledge@Wharton: You bring up many examples of different people in this book and there were two — they're at absolute opposite ends of the spectrum. One is Warren Buffet — many people listening to this channel know the level of success that he has had. Another is Will Smith, the actor and (the lead in the old TV sitcom) the “Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.” How did those two play into the theories that you're trying to bring forward?

Duckworth: The attraction for me to people like Warren Buffet and Will Smith is they're a success in that I can try to reverse-engineer who they are. Who are these outliers and what are they like? But actually, it's more that I find them both to be very psychologically perceptive. When you read Warren Buffet's annual letters, you think to yourself — or at least, I do — “This guy is a world-class psychologist.”

When I listen to Will Smith — I got to listen to him in person recently, but you watch YouTube videos and you read interviews — he is an extraordinarily psychologically perceptive human being. I feel like they have insights that I see in my own research. But

the way that Warren Buffet and especially Will Smith express them, they are just way more fun to listen to.

Knowledge@Wharton: If you think about it from a business perspective, many people might say, “Okay, well, that may be something that’s more geared for the arts. You know, if you’re a musician or if you’re an artist or an actor, whatever that might be.” That’s probably not the case. Warren Buffet, I would think, has a level of passion for business that probably not many people have out there.

Duckworth: I don’t think passion is something that was reserved for the creative arts, though, of course, those people are passionate. But I have met midwives who are passionate about what they do.

“When you keep hitting a brick wall, it’s not perseverance to keep hitting it. It’s perseverance to take a step back [and] reflect.”

I have had middle-level managers and salespeople who are passionate about what they do. If you get into something — maybe when you’re 18 — you couldn’t even anticipate, that you would fall in love. But there are elements, like, “Oh, I love working with people and complex problems. I like jobs where I am on my feet all the time and I am outside.” There are elements that are hard to predict in advance, but they do come to define what you love.

Knowledge@Wharton: Perseverance, which is part of your book’s title, is also being able to adapt when things don’t go right and not just — “Oh, okay, well, now I’m done, I can’t complete this project” — but being able to take the turn in the road and get back on path.

Duckworth: In some ways people think that perseverance must mean bull-headedly just heading in one direction no matter what. But when you keep hitting a brick wall, it’s not perseverance to keep hitting it. It’s perseverance to take a step back, maybe a moment or two to reflect and maybe you need to turn left.

The thing to be sticky about, the thing to be tenacious and uncompromising about are your higher-level values that guide what you are doing, that have many roots to it. Oftentimes what it means to be persevering is to take a day off and to get your bearings or to quit a project even and start a new one, because you realize that this is a better way forward.

Knowledge@Wharton: But is it hard for many people to truly understand that and to be able to want to take the step back to take the two steps forward?

Duckworth: Even for me, it’s hard. That’s the only advice I would offer. This is why friends and advisers and former professors you are still in touch with, and sisters and uncles, are all so important, because it is oftentimes more clear in their mind’s eye what the right thing to do is than your own — you’re so immersed in circumstances. One bit of practical advice is — have a few people you really trust and lean on them. Ask them, “Am I being an idiot here? Or should I be doing something differently?”

Knowledge@Wharton: Is that hard to do at times? If you have friends to help you out, that’s a benefit. But I would think it’s hard to do that sometimes in the corporate environment because of how businesses can be structured, although some businesses are

changing that kind of philosophy and it may make it a little easier.

Duckworth: It is a reality that corporate cultures don't reward vulnerability, and reward dependency on another. But truly, the world-class businesses, the ones that are doing the best and will continue to do the best are ones where people come to work and it's a high-trust environment and they don't have to lie. They can say that they had a bad day. Or they can say, "I made a bad decision and I need to actually fix it, but first, I need to own it."

I hope people will end up in the corporations that have positive workplaces. If you don't, you can still rely on a confidante that is someone that you met early on and that you trust or sometimes it's someone outside the workplace.

Knowledge@Wharton: This could have an effect on businesses. It may be another one of those ideas that [could have an impact] if you can get that belief from the C-Suite on down. Most companies want to see bottom-line results, but they also want to see their employees successful and happy in the process of doing it.

Duckworth: The wonderful thing about modern psychology on achievement and on happiness is that it does not seem to be an either/or, and it's not a trade-off. The happiest workers are almost always the most productive ones and vice versa. I'm not saying it's easy to do, but you can absolutely strive to build an environment that encourages both happiness and success.

"When people spend a lot of time on social media, they think they're getting social interaction and they think they're happier, but you actually feel worse about yourself."

Knowledge@Wharton: That ends up being very important for kids, because many people believe that at some level, education has gotten into this hand-holding, of "What can I do for you, Johnny or Jane?" We've almost gone way over the edge in terms of trying to help kids out, rather than them learning things and building a little bit of that tough skin on themselves.

Duckworth: Decades of research on parenting confirms that kids need both love and support, and demands and challenges, to do well. So, if you only give one — if it's only praise — and there's never a challenge, that's not good. What we should strive for is challenge plus support. Another fact from the parenting literature is that consistency is much more effective in parenting than inconsistency.

Knowledge@Wharton: If our kids are learning some of these principles and having more grit as they are coming up through school that will play out in college and then into business, what kind of effect will that have on business when these kids get to that level?

Duckworth: To paint a very optimistic picture — it's a wonderful world. People on the train — when they open their laptops and you get into conversation, they can say, "You know, I love what I do." They can be engaged in a way that at the extreme, they could say, "Yes, it's a calling for me." That would be a terrific world. Sometimes people say, "Oh, what would happen if everybody were like this? Would that be a terrible thing?" I think quite the opposite. I think it would be wonderful.

The seismic shift going on is if you compare how we interact with each other today versus

100 or 200 years ago, we're much more empathetic and psychologically wise than our forefathers and our ancestors. In general, it's not just grit, but many other qualities, like emotional intelligence that we're learning more about. It's not just the scientists who know about it — it's everyone, and that's a good thing.

Knowledge@Wharton: Is it helped or hurt by the fact that we're in this digital society and we live on our smartphones, and we don't communicate face-to-face or on the phone as much as we did when we were younger?

Duckworth: I was recently having a conversation with Arianna Huffington, the founder of The Huffington Post. She said one of her priorities is to get people off their devices. I said, 'wow, when you're saying that, I think that really means a lot.' When people spend a lot of time on social media, they think they're getting social interaction and they think they're happier, but in many studies, you actually feel worse about yourself — in part because social media paints a very unrealistic view. It's always sunset and your hair always looks good. And it's always your birthday and everybody is always beautiful. That's not reality.

I'm hoping that digital technology enables rather than hinders human development. That's not going to happen unless we're intentional about it. If you just let market forces do what they will, you may not end up with digital technology helping.