

Beyond Grit: The Science of Creativity, Purpose, and Motivation by Heleo Editors

“Your interests and your passion develop over time. I want to disabuse people of this mythology of ‘it happens to you and if you’re lucky, you find it, and then that’s all you have to do.’”

Angela Duckworth is a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania and the bestselling author of *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. She is the Founder and Scientific Director of a non-profit, Character Lab, and in 2013 was named a recipient of a MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship. Recently, she joined Adam Grant for an evening of conversation as a part of the Authors@Wharton speakers series. Adam Grant is the bestselling author of *Give and Take* and *Originals*, and has been recognized as the Wharton School of Business’ highest-rated professor and its youngest professor to receive full tenure. They discussed top misconceptions about grit, and delved into the relationship between grittiness and creativity.

This conversation has been edited and condensed. To view the full conversation, click the video below.

Adam: You have a rule at home around deliberate practice. What is that?

Angela: It’s called the “hard thing” rule. Everybody in our house, kids and grown-ups alike, has to do a hard thing. It’s defined as doing the kind of deliberate practice that Lauren [Eskreis-Winkler] studies. It’s not, “Oh, yeah, I do pottery once a week and we make pots and then we eat crackers.” That doesn’t count. That’s not a hard thing. You don’t get feedback. You’re not improving. You don’t have goals.

The second part of the hard thing rule is that you can’t quit in the middle. You can’t quit in the middle of track season or in the middle of your viola sessions when the tuition payment isn’t up. That’s in part because I do believe that most human beings need a little nudge to finish things that they’ve done and to not quit on bad days.

The third part of the hard thing rule is what makes me not a tiger mom, and that is: nobody gets to choose your hard thing but you. That has applied since they were five years old.

There’s a multiple choice set. It’s not open ended, but you do get a choice. The choice is important because you cannot assign your children to interests.

Adam: What is your hard thing right now?

Angela: I am deliberately practicing doing less better. I will be a more effective psychologist if I stop trying to collaborate with everyone. I can only collaborate with probably 40 people at a time, not everyone. That's one important thing that I'm doing.

Adam: Can you talk a little about building grit? I think we're all clear that deliberate practice is important. We need good role models. We need regular feedback and goals so we can gauge our progress, but there's often a gap between knowing those things are important and actually doing them.

Angela: It depends on what it is that you're struggling with.

If we could reincarnate only a few people, I would vote for Benjamin Bloom, psychologist from the University of Chicago. He studied world class achievers and found that when they develop, they develop in stages—and the first stage is interest. So if you don't have that checked off, that's where you start.

The second stage Bloom identified is practice. He called it the middle years because it's a period of prolonged skill development and dedicated practice.

The third stage is this idea of purpose. "Is it possible for me to see how my job has beyond-the-self purpose?" I'll give you an example: I studied a wine taster and said to him, "Your job... it's not really like saving the world." And he said, "I know I'm not curing cancer, but when I help somebody appreciate their palate, when I see them enjoying a beautiful bottle of wine, it's like a light bulb goes off. My mission in life is to have a million of these light bulbs go off." That is a human being with beyond-the-self purpose.

Then, finally, there's the hope stage. A lot of people quit things not because they've lost interest, or because they're not willing to practice or don't feel like it's important, but because they lost hope. At some point you're like, "I don't think I can do it. It's not in the cards." If that's the box that's empty for you, I would say 50 years of psychological science—psychological science that began right here at the University of Pennsylvania—has more or less decoded hope.

Carol Dweck made a huge contribution, but the scientific experiments that were done a few blocks away showed that when you lose hope, you fall into this kind of fixed mind set: "things aren't going to change." You're looking for more and more evidence that nothing's going to change, and then, of course, you prove yourself right because you don't go out for the job interview, you don't wake up early and try.

Of these four boxes, there's more and more science about what goes next to them, and depending on what it is that's missing for you, there are feasible things to learn.

"There's a really fine line between heroic persistence and just stupid persistence."

Adam: Do you think it's possible to have too much grit? As you know, I worry a lot about escalation commitment and there's a really fine line between heroic persistence and just stupid persistence.

Angela: I got an email just two days ago from someone who's been applying for a school and getting rejected, rejected, rejected—and they said, "Should I spend another year trying?" You might think that being Angela Duckworth, I would have emailed back and said, "Get back in there! You can do it." But I didn't.

I said, “Do you know three people who know you well and have some expertise on the situation? Ask them for their candid opinion, and make sure that one of them doesn’t always agree with the other two, and then make a judgment.”

It’s actually an idea that you may have given me because we talked about this a couple years ago. It protects you from escalation. Having outside perspective on your problem is enormously helpful.

Adam: Also, it comes back to the point of deliberate practice. You said the way to build grit is to get lots of feedback and just as that’s useful for building grit it should also be important for choosing what to invest your grit in.

Angela: Feedback is great. I cannot see any downside from it. Is feedback ever a bad thing?

Adam: Sure.

Angela: When?

Adam: Well, you already qualified one of the conditions, which is when people don’t actually know you well or they’re not qualified to judge.

Angela: Bad feedback.

Adam: I also know people who seek too much feedback. Sheryl Sandberg describes herself as one of those people.

Angela: She’s done okay, though.

Adam: One of the critiques of grit is that it blames individuals for their own problems and that it’s easier to develop grit if you live in a world of privilege. If you lack resources, whether financial or social, if you belong to an underrepresented minority group, then grit is a lot harder and that it’s not the solution of social problems in education or anywhere else. What would you say to those critics?

Angela: I completely agree with them. I did a study for the Baltimore public schools a few years ago. The then-superintendent and the leadership asked me to come and make the kids grittier. “Let’s help the Baltimore public kids be grittier to fix all their achievement problems.”

So I sat in the back of the classrooms just to see what was going on. And I never really saw, except for one seventh period science class, anybody really taught anything—at all. I was like, “I wonder if at any point children are going to be taught something.”

I also saw incredibly awful circumstances. The way kids are talked to and just the level of chaos. At a computer class, four kids sat there the entire period doing nothing. Why? Because there weren’t enough laptops to go around. That’s terrible, but also, could somebody maybe pair you up and you could share laptops?

There were so many things that at the end of the study I said, “Probably the last thing you need is Angela Duckworth here to make kids grittier, because their circumstances are not allowing them to develop or express any of the things that I study.” I stand with the critics when they say, “Grit is absolutely not enough. Let’s not lay more blame at the feet of

victims who don't have any say in their circumstances." I think that is a lot of humanity. They're right.

Adam: Let's look to you as a critic then. One of my favorite things you've done is criticized research on self-control and willpower. There's this idea that psychologists are very fond of that willpower is a finite resource. If you use it, then you deplete it, and you have less self-control and you're more likely to make bad decisions and unethical choices. And you said, "not so much."

Angela: That's right. The depletion model was very popular. Not only in the dorky circles in which we operate, but in the world in the general, so your New York Times reader had heard about it.

We had an alternative explanation for why after you do something really hard and you feel exhausted, very often you don't feel like doing something hard afterward: it's not a physical thing that's depleted, it's a motivational change. The human brain evolved over many, many generations, and generally it has learned that when you are working really hard and you don't get an immediate reward, you should probably stop working really hard and maybe do something else. We think that this has carried over, and that's why you're less inclined to do hard things, even though you could. That's why in many studies where you re-motivate people with little things, like giving them praise or gestures, "oh, by the way, here's a pencil," their performance goes right back up. That suggests to us that it's motivational, not physical depletion.

"I don't believe in polymaths, really. If you want to choose to be a jack of all trades, God bless you. I think it's a fool's errand to try to become world class at many things."

Adam: Another thing that people are often curious about is being a polymath, having lots of different skills and not being a jack of all trades but actually a master of multiple. What can you tell us about how to do that?

Angela: I think it's increasingly hard in the 21st century to rise to the top of the field by spending time in your day doing four other things. It's just simple math. For me, I think about grit all the time. I get up, drink water in the middle of the night, I'm thinking about grit. Making breakfast, I'm thinking about grit. Go to a Starbucks, grit. That is a huge advantage compared to somebody else who thinks about grit for an hour a week.

I don't believe in polymaths, really. If you want to choose to be a jack of all trades, God bless you. I think it's a fool's errand to try to become world class at many things.

Adam: What would you say then to the Da Vincis or the Richard Feynmans of the world?

Angela: Feynman was a world class physicist and what was the other thing?

Adam: Safecracker.

Angela: World class safecracker?

Adam: Seriously, that's a thing.

Angela: But is Richard Feynman really as great at safe cracking as he is at physics? With polymaths, often when you dig a little, they're not really truly world class in all that many very different things.

I will say this: people live longer than they used to. Studies show that with thousands of hours of practice you can actually achieve world class levels of achievement in many fields. It takes just seven or eight years, ten years. So if you live long enough, you can serially move from one thing to another, achieve world class in two things in a row.

Adam: You've actually spent time with one of these people, or at least his family: Steve Young.

Angela: Yes, he's in finance now. I don't know whether he's world class. My guess is that he's not as good at venture capital as he is at being quarterback because he was an NFL Hall of Famer. However, he's extraordinarily successful, yes.

You get one life to live. One story to tell. I think most of us would like to say at the end of that story, "I did something that was interesting to me. I helped other people. Every day, I tried to get a little bit better and when things were really tough, I kept going. Did I win the Nobel Prize? Maybe not. But I'm after the process of excellence."

Adam: You talk a lot about the inner play of passion and purpose, and I'm curious about your take on whether those are substitutes for each other. If you're really fascinated by something, do you still need this sense that it's going to help other people, and if you care enough about those other people, do you still need to be interested?

Angela: I will say this, I never studied a paragon of grit who did not have purpose. It's possible that they're out there, but I haven't found them. I think interest and beyond-the-self purpose are twin engines of motivation. In theory, a plane could run on one engine alone—just interest or just purpose—but so often, it's both.

Adam: So how do you really know when you've discovered a passion? A lot of students believe that they are passionate about something until they work in that job for four days. Suddenly they discover, finance is not what they thought it was.

What are the signals that something is going to be a sustained interest as opposed to "that was kind of interesting in the beginning and I now discovered enough about it to know that I'm not excited about it? It's not me."

Angela: Well, one thing is, maybe we shouldn't use the word "discover." Your interests and your passion develop over time. I want to disabuse people of this mythology of "it happens to you and if you're lucky, you find it, and then that's all you have to do." That's not true. It happens gradually, and there's a lot you have to do, like keep exposing yourself to stuff and find mentors and so forth. It's a process of development, not a one-time discovery.

What's fascinating to me that people in the early stages of interest development often are not even aware that they're interested in it. My 13 year-old is reading cookbooks—which is weird when you're 13—and every day I come home and there's another batch of baked goods that we don't need. So I asked her, "Why don't you do pastry or baking as your hard thing?" and she said, "Why would I do that?" I said, "Because, you know, you're interested in it." She said, "No I'm not."

"We know that breadth is as important, or more important, than depth when it come to generating creative ideas and seeing outside the assumptions that everybody else takes for granted."

Boredom's actually the opposite of interest. Everybody knows when they're bored, and if you say, "Are you bored?" They say, "oh, yeah. I'm bored." They know.

As for your finance job example, I'm not saying that you should shackle yourself to a career, but you shouldn't quit in the middle of things either. You should, at the beginning of an endeavor say, "I'm going to give myself the summer to figure out why JP Morgan is for me." Finish what you began. At the end of the summer, then you can decide what to do.

Adam: Where do you come down these days on graded creativity? We've debated back and forth a lot about, is it good? Is it bad?

Angela: First of all, I don't think they're the same thing. You can be a really gritty person and fantastically uncreative. Grit is not everything you would want to have in your life, and creativity is one of the things that is different from grit. Of course, you need some amount of grit to be successful in any creative endeavor, but the part about creativity where there's flexibility and just play and kind of, "Oh, I'll put these two ideas together that nobody ever thought to put together and I don't have a goal and it's not a plan. There's no feedback. I'm just like... what the hell." I think there is a tension there, and a risk that somebody who could be really, really gritty would be too rigid and inflexible, not allowing themselves to open up a window for just chance and creative thought. That's where I stand for creativity. Where do you stand for it?

Adam: I think you're being too hard on grit, actually. We know that breadth is as important, or more important, than depth when it come to generating creative ideas and seeing outside the assumptions that everybody else takes for granted. Then, in order to generate lots of ideas and stick with them and see whether they have real potential, I don't think there's anything more important than persistence.

In fact, you spent a lot of time studying conscientiousness which is, I think, the broad personality trait most associated with being hard-working, focused, and disciplined. It's probably, other than openness, the best predictor of creativity because, even if you have all these linear sort of overly structured thoughts, you work a lot more hours, you generate a lot more ideas, and you're going to stumble on creativity that way.

Adam: What would you say is the worst advice you hear given about grit and any tips that we haven't covered yet?

Angela: The worst advice I ever hear is often asked by Asian parents in the audience: "How do I get my kids into Harvard?" I have this whole preamble about passion and interest and they're like, "How do I get them to Harvard? How do I get them to study harder?" They missed completely the idea that people who are gritty are intrinsically motivated. You cannot force anyone else to be gritty. If you want to be a demanding but supportive parent or leader, be someone who really listens and respects the individuality of the person that you're trying to help.

Finally, among the things that I don't know is the influence of the culture. Every university has a culture. Every family has a culture. Every sports team has a culture. In addition to all the things that I've studied, we're powerfully influenced by our culture, and I would love to know more about cultures and grit.