

A Message from the Head of School

“Fall Seven, Rise Eight”:

The Importance of Grit to Success and Fulfillment—Part 2



By Robb Gaskins, Ph.D.

Do you remember the last time you set out to complete a task and repeatedly met with obstacles, adversity, and failure? What was your response? If you faced each setback with a renewed determination to achieve your goal, you demonstrated perseverance, and, most likely, you eventually met with success and gained a richer understanding of the issue (and yourself) in the process. There is an old Japanese saying that captures this tenacious spirit quite well, “Fall seven, rise eight” (Duckworth, 2016). It suggests that no matter how many times you get knocked down by adversity, you will get back up and continue to pursue your objective. Perseverance is one of two defining characteristics of grit* (the other is passion), a quality consistently found to be correlated with success and fulfillment. The question is: How do you develop perseverance? In what follows, I will provide an answer grounded in Angela Duckworth’s (2016) illuminating work on grit and embellished by other relevant research found across the psychological literature.

** Grit is unwavering perseverance focused on your deepest passion for an extended period of time.*

Focus on Underlying Beliefs

In order to maintain an unflinching commitment to your passion and endure the hardships required to excel, you must have a particular set of beliefs about experience, learning, knowledge, intelligence, success, and yourself. At its core, perseverance demands the belief that the present situation can change and that you can affect that change. Right this moment, you may have minimal knowledge about a particular subject or rudimentary skill in a specific area, but that doesn’t mean it will remain that way. You can take action to build your expertise in any domain. In a similar fashion, our intelligence is not fixed. There is no aspect of one’s cognitive profile that cannot be strengthened through hard work and sound training.

These concepts reflect the essence of Carol Dweck’s (2006) research on mindset. People come to assume a set of beliefs about the source of ability, intelligence, and success that color their perceptions and shape their actions. At one end of the continuum, people believe ability and intelligence are innate and shape your potential for success. You can make modest gains in your abilities and intelligence, but, for the most part, you either have it or you don’t. This is called a fixed mindset. For people with this mindset, failure is a confirmation of a lack of ability, intelligence, or both. As such, perseverance is futile and painful given that persistently trying and failing will only expose your limitations for all to see. At the other end of the continuum, people believe that through hard work, strategic effort, and discipline, you can change your ability, intelligence, and potential for success. This is called a growth mindset. For people with this mindset, failure simply means you need to work harder, take a different approach, and keep trying. As such,

perseverance is an essential part of bringing about real change.

Optimism and pessimism function similarly. The degree to which someone is optimistic or pessimistic is guided by underlying beliefs and those beliefs affect one’s perseverance. People’s fundamental beliefs and subsequent explanations about the relationship between adversity and consequences affect their outlook, sense of hope, and will to take action to create change (Beck, 1976; Ellis, 1957; Seligman, 1991). For a pessimist, adversity directly leads to consequences and there is nothing you can do about it. For an optimist, “adversity” is just one way of conceptualizing the current set of circumstances and the consequences of those circumstances are determined by your beliefs and subsequent actions. Beck and Seligman speak of people interpreting experience through an explanatory style that is framed by the 3 P’s – permanence, personal responsibility, and pervasiveness. Pessimists see adversity as permanent, pervasive (the current adversity means everything will go poorly), and the result of personal inadequacies that they can’t change. With that understanding, perseverance is pointless. Optimists see adversity as temporary, specific to particular circumstances, and within their power to change. With that understanding, perseverance is an essential part of progressing toward your goal.

Across all of this research, the consistent element is that one’s underlying beliefs affect the degree to which you feel you can control your experience, and those beliefs directly affect your perseverance. If you want to encourage perseverance, you need to help students develop a growth mindset and an optimistic framework for interpreting experience.

Identify Your Purpose

If you want to develop perseverance, you need to tap into a source of motivation that justifies the expenditure of a great deal of time and energy and the endurance of a tremendous amount of adversity and failure. What overarching goal matters most to you? Many experts and researchers suggest one of the most fundamental motivations for humans is their desire to take actions they feel will make a difference in the world or fulfill a purpose greater than themselves (e.g., Duckworth, 2016; Pink, 2009; Sandberg & Grant, 2017; Sinek, 2009). Having a sense of purpose is also connected with increased resilience and perseverance. As Viktor Frankl (1959) demonstrated through his inspiring actions and Friedrich Nietzsche famously stated in *Twilight of the Idols* (1889/2003), “If we possess our why of life, we can put up with almost any how” (p. 33). Thus, if you want to develop perseverance, it certainly helps to establish a strong purpose to which you are directing your efforts. (See Part I of this column in the Winter 2017 issue of the Benchmark Magazine to learn more about how to develop a passion.)

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Engage in Deliberate Practice

In order to develop perseverance, it is also helpful to see clear evidence that the challenges you are enduring are moving you progressively closer to attaining your goal. It is commonly understood that investing a great deal of time in practice will result in continual progress. While practice is certainly essential to improvement, and more is better than less, extensive hours of practice will not necessarily make us experts. In fact, practice rarely makes perfect. Research on expertise indicates that what truly sets experts apart is not simply that they practice far more than the rest of us, it is that they practice differently. Consequently, if your goal is excellence, you don't just need 10,000 hours of practice, you need 10,000 hours of the "right" kind of practice.

Anders Ericsson, one of the world's foremost experts in expertise, calls this type of practice "deliberate practice." Deliberate practice focuses on strengthening your performance by systematically addressing areas of weakness and helping you stretch beyond your current level of ability (Ericsson & Pool, 2016). Duckworth (2016) consolidates the essence of deliberate practice into four central components:

- A clearly defined stretch goal - Experts create a measurable goal to address a specific weakness in the area they seek to develop.
- Full concentration and effort - Experts exert their full concentration and maximum effort during deliberate practice. They are not simply logging hours mindlessly. They are pushing themselves as hard as they can. This point explains why experts engage in deliberate practice for only about three to five hours a day and only an hour at a time before taking a break.
- Immediate and informative feedback - Experts evaluate their performance with a focus on what they need to improve.
- Repetition with reflection and refinement - After arriving at the correct form, experts practice repeatedly with consistent reflection and refinement until they have achieved mastery that is effortless and automatic.

Once experts have achieved mastery of that particular aspect of their practice, they select a new stretch goal and continue in this fashion until their overall performance is uniformly exceptional. While demanding, becoming immersed in a process like deliberate practice develops perseverance by demonstrating that through the endurance of hardship and failure you can emerge far stronger than when you began.

Obtain a Mentor

A critical aspect of pursuing excellence in any domain is having a coach or mentor to guide your development (e.g., Duckworth, 2016; Ericsson & Pool, 2016). A mentor can be a parent, teacher, or other respected individual who can not only model expertise but also carefully direct your training toward a desired goal. The type of support the mentor provides depends on the student's stage of development. Beginners require a focus on encouragement and praise along with a modicum of gentle correction. As students become more advanced (and thereby possess greater confidence and commitment), they require a greater focus on the development of their weaknesses through specific and immediate feedback. As students advance, gifted mentors continue to provide support, care, and respect in addition to setting high standards (e.g., Duckworth, 2016; Webb, 2016). This support is not only demonstrated through

their words, but also their non-verbal communications and actions. It should also be noted that excellent coaches reinforce the correlation between hard work, perseverance, and success throughout the process. In all of these ways, mentors develop perseverance while they are developing excellence.

Become Part of a Culture of Excellence

Humans are social beings. One of our fundamental motivations is to belong (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When we join a group, we identify with the group and the group's norms become our norms. When the group is committed to excellence, we begin to internalize the norms that support excellence (Duckworth, 2016). So, if the group is committed to setting high standards, working strategically, exerting maximum effort, relentlessly pursuing success, persevering through hardship, maintaining discipline, and sticking together, we internalize those principles, too. At the same time that the group supports the growth of its members, each member of the group also pushes the rest of the group to higher levels of achievement through his/her commitment to consistent improvement. This continually-evolving culture of excellence not only demands perseverance as the collective bar is consistently raised, but also supports and celebrates it. Consequently, if you want to develop perseverance, this is the place to be.

Developing Perseverance at Benchmark School

In helping our students to become confident and strategic thinkers, learners, and problem solvers, there are many strategies, conceptual frameworks, and personal characteristics we help students develop. While all of these components are important, perseverance is unquestionably among the most critical to students' future success. One of the most consistent comments we hear from our alumni is that they have been successful in school and life because Benchmark School taught them to approach tasks strategically and persevere in the face of adversity.

Given that our methods of developing perseverance are based on the research literature related to persistence, resilience, motivation, self-regulation, and expertise, it is not surprising that our instruction is strikingly consistent with Angela Duckworth's (2016) research on grit and the rest of the research-based ideas presented earlier. For example:

- From the time students enter Benchmark School, we begin to discuss the importance of underlying beliefs. We develop a growth mindset and promote optimism through the application of a variation of the ABC (Adversity, Beliefs, Consequences) model promoted in the work of Ellis, Beck, & Seligman.
- We consistently work with students to reinforce the importance of serving a purpose beyond themselves, and we support students on their journeys toward the realization of their own "whys."
- We engage students in a variation of deliberate practice. We systematically identify areas of challenge for students (moving toward students identifying their own areas of challenge), establish stretch goals, work toward students applying their full attention, provide specific and immediate feedback, and engage students in repeated practice with continual reflection and refinement on the way to mastery before repeating the process with new goals.

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- Our teachers serve as supportive coaches who hold high standards for all of our students. With a teacher-student ratio of 1:3, our students receive a tremendous amount of individual guidance tailored to each student's specific needs. As students enter our middle school, they are assigned a particular teacher to be their mentor throughout their middle school years. The mentors become trusted advocates and personal guides with a deep commitment to their mentees' development.
- We work hard to establish a caring community that is concurrently a culture of excellence. The community's norms become the students' norms. As such, we support one another's growth and become stronger together.

At the end of her book, Angela Duckworth (2016) states a simple truth that we would all do well to remember: "...more often than we think, our limits are self-imposed" (p. 275). What is exciting is that when we develop passion, perseverance, and grit, we can persist in the face of adversity, exceed our perceived limits, and achieve goals we may not have initially believed possible. Beyond that, as we form cultures of excellence and each individual grows, the whole community gets a little stronger. That is the power of grit.

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