

Public Lecture

by **Howard Gardner**

If you were to ask people what one needs to be successful, there is a likely answer: “to be smart and work hard” – or, more tersely, “wit and grit.”

Indeed, I would once have given this answer – but decades of research and reflection have convinced me that this answer is limited at best and, more likely, wrong-headed.

Many years ago, I began to pick apart the unexamined notion of intelligence. I surveyed diverse sources of information: the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in diverse cultures over centuries and millennia; the intellectual profiles of special populations like prodigies and savants; and what was known about the location of different capacities in different regions of the brain. Armed with a set of criteria from different disciplines, I identified seven separate intelligences. All human beings possess these seven intelligences, but we differ from one another in which are strong; and in any case, strength or weakness in one (say spatial intelligence) does not

predict strength or weakness in another (say, interpersonal or musical intelligence). I would now add a few more intelligences to the list, and others, most famously Daniel Goleman, have proposed yet other intelligences like emotional intelligence. I am no longer invested in my particular set of intelligences. For me, the important advance is that a multiplicity of intelligences has been acknowledged – wits, rather than wit.

Academic and other forms of intelligence are clearly important. But in recent years, it’s increasingly recognized that other human capacities are also relevant, and they have been dubbed “non-cognitive skills.” Included on the list are such valued capacities as empathy, imaginativeness, and creativity. Topping the list is the capacity called “grit.” Brought to public awareness by psychologist Angela Duckworth and journalist Paul Tough, grit denotes perseverance, stick-to-it-ness, the daily accumulation of valued skills and traits.

No one would oppose grit – indeed, I value it in my children and grandchildren, my students, and in myself (those hours of piano practice were not wasted!). And yet, one is stopped in one’s tracks once one realizes that Nazi youth and Gestapo had plenty of grit, as did Don Corleone. Two well-known books with ironic titles signal the limits of grit alone. David Halberstam’s *The Best and the Brightest* chronicled the all-too-direct march in the early 1960s from the halls of the Ivy League to the jungles of Vietnam. And more recently, *The Smartest Guys in the Room* by Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind details the cautionary tale emanating from the board room of Enron. Listed among the most valued company on the planet at the turn of the millennium, energy company Enron was actually a paper giant. And when it was unfrocked, thousands lost their jobs, while few of the leadership team were more than chastised.

Clearly, grit alone is not enough. We need to encourage grit that is directed, honestly and publicly, to positive societal ends; and to unmask grit that has been mobilized in damaging directions, whether enroute to a pointless war or to unfairly rewarded manipulators of facts, figures, and fuel fees. As part of our research endeavors, my colleagues and I have created “The Good Project” and “The GoodWork Toolkit” (see www.thegoodproject.org). These efforts, along with those of many individuals, groups, and organizations around the world, seek to modify the value-neutral term “grit” with the adjective “good.” And while none of us can claim that we have the ultimate definition or secret of goodness, we believe that open discussion of values and of ethical dilemmas, as well as reflection on what went wrong and why and what can be done better next time, is the course to follow.

I’ve left room for one other element in my opening question: what does it mean to “succeed?” Of course, it is crucial to unpack this word; to indicate whether success means accumulated wealth and/or worldwide fame and/or personal pleasures; or whether it entails caring for family and friends, or helping to build a better, fairer, more sustainable community, society, or planet. Few individuals are going to frankly announce a purely selfish definition of success; only disinterested others can judge how each of us actually conceptualizes and pursues success. My own hope: success lies in serving well the several communities in which we live.

In this era of succinct messaging, I’ve created a twitter-short formula:
Multiple Wits and Good Grits Lead to a Success Beyond Selfies.



[*Beyond Wit and Grit*]

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@ C-LP-11, HKIEd Tai Po Campus

Enquiries / Registration:

adw-pd@ied.edu.hk or 2948 6257 or 9759 1649

