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CHAPTER 1

Why Grit Matters

The difference between a successful person and others is not a lack of strength, not a lack of knowledge, but rather a lack of will.

—VINCE LOMBARDI

STEVE JOBS. COLIN POWELL. MICHAEL JORDAN. ALL FAMOUS individuals who excelled in their fields, and whose names have become synonymous with excellence and achievement. But apart from that you are probably unaware of any similarity between them. After all, what does one of the most transformational pioneers of the personal software industry have to do with leading troops into battle, or guiding America's foreign policy? And what do the exploits of the greatest basketball player of his generation have to do with Silicon Valley or the Pentagon? But these three over-achievers share one very surprising trait. All three were so ordinary growing up that virtually no one predicted their

future greatness. They were all easily overlooked and dismissed, their talents grossly underestimated.

Steve Jobs had a 2.65 GPA in high school and never completed his first year of college. As a high school sophomore, Michael Jordan went home in tears after his basketball coach decided he wasn't good enough to make the cut for the school's varsity team. The future secretary of state and chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff trudged through high school with a very ordinary C average, and scant self-confidence. Not long ago, Colin Powell told an interviewer, "I never thought I would be someone important. I was just a pretty average kid with average grades in an average home. There was nothing special about me."

So what was it that changed the course of Powell's life? How is it that countless successful people don't display obvious special gifts, talent, or genius early on? How do you catch up in the game of life when you aren't blessed with perfect scores on your SAT or an Ivy League education or a family fortune to give you a head start?

Emerging research suggests that there is far more to success in life than a country club pedigree or natural ability and sheer talent. Passion and perseverance, it turns out, matter more than talent or intelligence when it comes to being successful. For most of us, the corner office or professional kudos is the result of hard work, rather than exceptional genes. The endgame, it turns out, belongs to the truly diligent, not the merely talented. It belongs to those who have *grit*.

Grit is a somewhat old-fashioned term, resurrected from a previous century. But it is enjoying a remarkable renaissance these days. Why? Because it seems as if we are getting soft. Grit is about sweat, not swagger. Character, not charisma. Grit has been equated more with methodical stick-to-itiveness and survival than any secret ingredient to success. Which is too bad, because for so many, grit is the secret to success. Grit is the result of a hard-fought struggle, a willingness to take risks, a strong sense of determination, working relentlessly toward a goal, taking challenges in stride, and having the passion and perseverance to accomplish difficult things, even if you are wallowing in the most difficult circumstances.

Perhaps what we love most about grit is that you don't have to be born with it. It can be learned. In fact, perseverance and the value of hard work have been, since the time of the Greek philosophers, always considered to be core elements of raising and educating the next generation. Aristotle, writing about the virtues of hard work, said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act but a habit." Our Founding Fathers, with their great admiration for the classical philosophers, embraced these tenets. From the revolution to the westward expansion, through the industrial revolution, up through the end of World War II, the belief that raising strong, resilient, and self-reliant children was each parent's responsibility was part of our cultural DNA. But then something changed.

Don't Flatter Yourself

Since the late 1960s, two generations have been raised under the banner of the self-esteem movement, in which psychologists have told parents and educators that praise will give their children more confidence, which will help them be successful. At the height of the craze, the California legislature established a self-esteem task force for the state's schools and in 1989 issued a report that persuaded schools nationwide to nurture their students' self-esteem as a way of eliminating social problems and academic failure. But guess what—it hasn't worked.

The result has been that children get a trophy even when they lose. In some sports, coaches don't even keep score anymore. Grade inflation from elementary school through college has become a major issue, and although American students rank low on skills, they are at the top of the world in believing they're good at math. Millennials' sense of entitlement in the workplace, where twenty-somethings expect to be swiftly promoted even in their first jobs, has become the stuff of HR department lore. As have "fluffed up" performance reviews from supervisors afraid to give a little tough love to staff for fear of demoralizing them.

The fact that so many of us think we are exceptional has thoroughly permeated pop culture. As the main character in the 2004 children's movie *The Incredibles* said, "They keep inventing new ways to celebrate mediocrity." The seventh-place ribbons adorning the walls in *Meet the Fockers* were co-medic, but not too far from the truth in our "everyone is special" culture.

Unfortunately, the whole self-esteem movement has been a flop, undermining the natural grit that this nation of immigrants brought with them in building a new life in a new land. And there is the beginning of a backlash.

You're Nothing Special

In his famous commencement speech, which quickly went viral, English teacher David McCullough Jr. told the Class of 2012 graduates of Wellesley High School (an affluent Boston suburb), "You're not special. . . . Contrary to what your U9 soccer trophy suggests, your glowing seventh-grade report card, despite every assurance of a certain corpulent purple dinosaur, that nice Mister Rogers and your batty aunt Sylvia, no matter how often your maternal caped crusader has swooped in to save you—you're nothing special." McCullough said Americans have "come to love accolades more than genuine achievement. No longer is it how you play the game, no longer is it even whether you win or lose, or learn or grow, or enjoy yourself doing it. Now it's 'So what does this get me?'" He urged the graduates to read, and concluded, "The fulfilling life, the distinctive life, the relevant life, is an achievement, not something that will fall into your lap because you're a nice person or Mommy ordered it from the caterer."

After reviewing fifteen thousand studies that the self-esteem movement generated, author Kay Hymowitz wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, "High self-esteem doesn't improve grades, reduce anti-social behavior, deter alcohol drinking

or do much of anything good for kids. In fact, telling kids how smart they are can be counterproductive. Many children who are convinced that they are little geniuses tend not to put much effort into their work. Others are troubled by the latent anxiety of adults who feel it necessary to praise them constantly.”

In a 2012 study using eye tracking, researchers Bradley Morris and Shannon Zentall asked kids to draw pictures. Those who heard praise suggesting they had an innate talent—were opposed to those who were praised for their effort—were twice as fixated on mistakes they’d made in their pictures.

What this tells us is that children who are outperformed may give up rather than fight to improve, and those who do win may not feel compelled to keep trying as hard if even the losers get praise and a trophy.

Everyone could benefit from being taught to strive—the US Department of Education is now encouraging the teaching of grit and resilience among all students.

Meghan Dunn agrees. She is the founding principal of Riverdale Avenue Community School PS 446, located in Brownsville, Brooklyn. Many of her students are from low-income homes. She believes grit is their path to success. She instills grit by pushing her students out of their comfort zone—taking city kids camping, having them play chess or a team sport—and learning how to take losing in stride. She encourages students by teaching problem-solving skills, asking, “Well, what do you think?” or “What would you do?” She encourages parents and guardians to make sure

that their kids finish whatever they start, even when it gets hard, and to let kids do things for themselves. She tells parents not to do the packing for those camping trips, because if they do, the students cannot find what they need and cannot figure out how to repack. To Meghan, forgetting a flashlight is not a life-or-death experience, but a teaching opportunity, so that when kids get older they know how to think and plan ahead. She believes it is the small things that teach kids grit—having chores and responsibilities, and an adult to offer support.

Bob Deutsch, a PhD in cognitive neuroscience, has a unique perspective on the role of grit in shaping our lives.

“There are different levels of grit,” Deutsch told us. “It’s not a unified, generic, all-or-nothing concept. There’s a million people who have grit, and there’s a million who don’t. But of those who don’t, at least eighty percent could have grit.” In other words, it’s a trait that can be developed, a skill that can be learned when a person is exposed to the right kind of training, experiences, and practice.

We would argue that it was grit that enabled “Air Jordan” to go on to dazzle his high school JV team and ultimately become, well, Michael Jordan. How does Jordan sum up what it took to become the best player in basketball history? “I’ve missed more than nine thousand shots in my career. I’ve lost almost three hundred games. Twenty-six times, I’ve been entrusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life, and that’s why I succeed.”

Get a Bronx Attitude

We both grew up in the Bronx—a place that for generations has been synonymous with grit. We grew up in hardworking families of modest means.

Robin's father had a small taxi business; her mother was a bookkeeper. Her parents instilled the value of hard work in her from an early age. When Robin would get a grade of 96 percent, her mother would say, encouragingly, "Next time, get one hundred." Robin attended Syracuse University with the help of scholarships and work-study jobs. When her fine arts degree in graphic design failed to land her a dream job in the white-shoe boys' club of Madison Avenue, she learned to type and got an administrative job in an ad agency. She watched others around her advance as she typed—badly.

"Inspired, I went back to school for an MBA, determined to work my way up to that corner office I craved." And she did. Robin says, "While I may at times have resented that my achievements have come less easily than others', today it is one of the things I value most in my life."

Linda came from a middle-class family; her parents worked tirelessly to put food on the family table. Linda honed her comedic instincts and wit at that table, hoping for some of the adulation her brilliant brother received. Like the rest of her family, she attended the local public City College of New York, and then struggled as a teacher, performer, and songwriter for years, before finally landing a job in advertising. She spent the next seventeen years

For Colin Powell, the son of Jamaican immigrants, it wasn't until he attended the City College of New York that he found his calling—in the Reserve Officers Training Corps. ROTC gave him the structure he needed and he soon became commander of his unit, launching his historic career.

For Steve Jobs, getting fired in 1985 from Apple, the company he founded—and the failure of his subsequent venture, NeXT Computer—set the stage for one of the most remarkable business comebacks in history. As he confessed in his commencement speech at Stanford University, "[I]t turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life."

Michael Bloomberg, the three-time mayor of New York City whose \$30 billion fortune makes him one of the richest people in the world, summed up the essential concept of grit when he explained his secret to success in an interview with *New York* magazine.

"I know what hard work is all about," Bloomberg said. "I still come back to what my strategy always was and will continue to be: I'm not the smartest guy, but I can outwork you. It's the one thing I can control."

We feel the same way about grit and hard work ourselves.

using her talent, tenacity, and perseverance to create notable campaigns and jingles for Kodak ("Kodak Moments"), Burger King, and Toys "R" Us, among others. Although Linda would agree her natural ability took her a couple of rungs up the ladder, it was her ability to bounce back after endless client rejections, and thousands of rewrites, that took her the rest of the way.

In 1997, Linda was the chief creative officer at a now-defunct New York ad agency and had been working on the Clairol business when another client asked her to resign Clairol because he felt it was in direct conflict with one of their hair care brands. With the backing of Clairol's then CEO, Steve Sadove, Linda decided to resign as well and open a small boutique agency out of her home, with Clairol as her first client. Knowing Linda was first and foremost a creative copywriter, Sadove suggested she meet with Robin, who was an executive vice president and group account director at a rival agency. Robin, as it turns out, had been looking to move to another agency.

Over a shared bran muffin, Robin and Linda agreed to join forces.

And so the Kaplan Thaler Group was born with six employees on the seven-hundred-square-foot third floor of the brownstone where Linda and her family lived on Nineteenth Street in the Chelsea section of Manhattan, with Clairol's Herbal Essences as our first account. (Remember the ad with a woman having an orgasmic experience washing her hair? *Yes! Yes! Yes!* That's the one.)

None of us had run a business before. The furniture was

rented. We had no high-speed copier; we borrowed Clairol's on our way into meetings. But the one thing we did have in huge quantities was grit. We worked tirelessly 24/7, with more determination and passion than perhaps we even realized we could muster. And it paid off. We quickly won more business from Clairol, and within that first year, the Kaplan Thaler Group went from having one client to \$80 million in billings, including clients such as the Red Cross and Toys "R" Us. The staff bulged to twenty-four. Every single one of us had to haul out one bag of trash at the end of the night because there wasn't enough money to hire a commercial garbage service. There were not enough chairs for everyone, creating an unusual incentive for people to get in early. In nice weather, staff would work on the roof. Often, presentations would be assembled on the floor.

"We were breaking every occupancy law in the books," Linda says, laughing.

Before long, the Kaplan Thaler Group became one of the fastest-growing agencies in the country. In 2012, the Kaplan Thaler Group merged with Publicis New York to become Publicis Kaplan Thaler, and the agency has more than \$3 billion in billings and more than eight hundred employees.

YES, WE WORKED hard. Yes, we had grit. Yes, we are grateful for the fact that we had loving support—and not much else for a long time—to fall back on at home. And while our parents were not immigrants, our experience is not dissimilar from that of many first-generation Americans,

fueled by hope and the need to succeed. There was no other option. And like many of our peers who have “made it,” we have children who are more financially comfortable than we were. And it concerns us.

Put Your Hands in Your Pockets

It’s hard not to want to protect your children from disappointment, rejection, and failure. But without it, they’d never get very far, as Linda learned firsthand:

“When our daughter, Emily, turned five, we bought her a pretty pink bicycle; we couldn’t wait to teach her how to ride it. Week after week, we would patiently hold the tiny seat while Emily attempted to gain her balance, gently pushing her along so she could stay on the bike. But every time we let go, Emily would fall.

“Over the next two years, my husband and I took turns teaching Emily how to ride, each time repeating the same procedure, and each time watching her fall. We came to the sad realization that our darling daughter might one day win the presidency, but she was never going to win the Tour de France.

“On Emily’s seventh birthday, as I was making one last valiant attempt to teach her, a bemused bike rider in his mid-seventies stopped and offered to help.

“‘I just don’t think she’s ever going to get the hang of it,’ I said with a lump in my throat, and a kink in my lumbar.

“‘Anyone can learn to ride a bike. Let me show you.’

“The man walked over to Emily and had her sit down, place her hands on the handlebars, and put her feet on the pedals.

“‘Now, Mom, what you need to do,’ he said confidently, ‘is take your hands, and ever so carefully, put them in your pockets.’

“‘But, but . . .’ I pleaded.

“The man gave Emily a gentle push. She fell. I rushed to pick her up, but he stopped me.

“Emily got up on the bike again, and fell again. My hands were trembling, but I kept them pinned to my pockets.

“Emily got up on the bike a third time, and kept on riding. And riding. She went on to become a proficient cyclist, and now, in her twenties, is an expert horseback rider, figure skater, and all-around wonderfully balanced young woman. I am proud to say I have had a hand in her many accomplishments. Mostly because I’ve had the good sense to keep both of them in my pockets.”

The Four Ingredients of Grit

Failure is how we learn—it’s how we develop and acquire grit. From our own experiences, and those of the countless successful people we have worked with across a wide array of industries, from writers and CEOs to lawyers and Broadway performers, we can say it is grit that got them, and us, where we are. Our research and experience tell us that grit can be broken down into four essential components:

Guts—Grit begins with the courage to take on a tough challenge, and not falter in the face of adversity. General George S. Patton famously defined courage as “fear holding on a minute longer.” Guts is what gives you the confidence to take a calculated risk, to be daring (without being reckless). Guts is about putting yourself out there, declaring your intention to triumph, even if victory appears to be nowhere in sight.

Resilience—Some of the world’s most notable high achievers have flunked or dropped out of school, been fired from their jobs, evicted from their homes, or dealt some other major setback that forced them to hit bottom. But they bounced back. Jerry Seinfeld got booed off the stage during his first stand-up gig. It took three attempts before Steven Spielberg was accepted by a film school. But neither let humiliation or failure diminish their conviction. Studies show that people with a high degree of grit are able to stay focused and motivated, whatever failures, obstacles, and adversities get in their way. George Foreman was a retired, overweight former two-time heavyweight champion when the threat of bankruptcy drove him to take up boxing gloves again at age forty-five. But he triumphed and reclaimed his heavyweight title, using his winnings to pay off his debt and launch George Foreman Grills. Today he’s worth an estimated \$200 million. Resilience is what gives grit its elasticity. It’s what makes you follow opportunity to the ends of the earth—even if it reroutes you to North Dakota after you bought a ticket for Maui.

Initiative—By definition, initiative—being a self-

starter—is what makes “grit dynamic, what sets it in motion. Leaders are often judged by their ability to take the initiative. But some of the most compelling examples of initiative are found far from the boardroom or the battlefield. One of our favorites took place on the African savanna, where thirteen-year-old Richard Turere was devastated to discover that lions had killed his family’s bull. What could prevent such an attack in the future? When the Masai boy patrolled the cattle pasture at night in an effort to keep the herd safe, he noticed that the prowling lions were scared off by the bouncing beam of his flashlight as he walked. Tinkering with scavenged solar-charging cells and flashlight parts, he created a “lions light” fence that effectively keeps the predators away. The moral of this story? You don’t have to outweigh or outrun an opponent if you can outsmart them first.

Tenacity—Tenacity is the relentless ability to stay focused on a goal. This is perhaps the most recognizable trait associated with grit. We see it in every athlete who overcomes a setback or a loss to win an Olympic medal or a championship ring; in every Nobel winner who has sweated through thousands of failed experiments and dead ends before making some groundbreaking discovery that has changed her field; in every entrepreneur who spends years fighting to launch a new service or product that ends up changing the way we live. Tenacity requires industriousness and determination, a value that, in the wake of the Great Depression, brought America to its industrial peak in the twentieth century. But it is a quality that seems in shorter

supply in today's digital age. Studies by people such as K. Anders Ericsson at Florida State University have shown it takes a minimum of ten years—and the right kind of focused attention—to master a skill at the highest levels and realize one's full potential. World-renowned cellist Pablo Casals, asked at the age of ninety-three why he continued to practice three hours a day, replied, "I'm beginning to notice some improvement."

The science of success is only beginning to be explored. And there is much to learn. But the great thing about grit is that working harder, smarter, more passionately, and longer is something we control, unlike the community we grew up in, the high school we attended, the money and resources our parents have, company politics, or the current state of the economy. It is *attainable* by each and every one of us. Even if we're not the smartest or most talented person in the room.

Right now there are millions of people who have the potential to become world-class musicians, bestselling authors, or professional athletes if they are able to draw upon the guts, resilience, initiative, and tenacity necessary to realize their potential. Could you be one of them? We invite you to take our Grit Quiz at www.grittogreat.com to help you find out how well you score on the four grit components and your areas for improvement. In the chapters ahead you'll find many helpful strategies on how to develop your grit to its full potential.

GRIT BUILDERS

Give some grit. As parents, mentors, friends, or bosses, we can encourage the development of grit in others by not only providing support and guidance but also allowing those around us to learn on their own. Positive feedback is important, but don't redo a direct report's lousy memo. Instead, tell them (nicely) how they can make it better. And the next time your kid asks for their favorite peanut butter and banana sandwich or macaroni and cheese, don't make it for them. Show them how to do it themselves. Who knows, you could be inspiring a lifelong love of cooking.

Do your to-do list. As a first grit exercise, make a list of those projects you want to get done, and commit to finishing at least one this week. It can be a small, mindless project such as cleaning out a drawer. Others may require more thought, such as reading up on a new subject that could be useful in your career or personal life. Commit yourself for one month to finish every project on that list. Knowing that you cannot give up will force you to overcome challenges and learn new things, proving to yourself that your abilities are not fixed—they can be developed.