

Career Compass No. 84: Got Grit?

Do I have it? Can I get more of it? What is that sense of indomitable spirit that can keep us going through all of the turmoil?

By Frank Benest | Aug 11, 2020 | ARTICLE

Dear Frank –

I'm the human resources manager in an urban county. With the approval of top management, I've been leading a multidepartment team to change our performance evaluation system. Many managers don't complete the annual performance reviews for their direct reports; most reviews are not submitted on time; the process takes an enormous number of hours of work for all; and everyone hates it. However, given our county's workload and continuing new demands, all the departments are distracted and are only passively supportive.



I firmly believe that a revamped performance evaluation system based on ongoing performance conversations can help us better engage employees, promote productivity and learning, and retain our talent. Even though my team has done all the research on best practices in the private and public sectors, our project doesn't seem like a priority for top management and thus our progress is slow.

My team is losing energy and is disheartened. I'm about to acknowledge defeat and quit. I don't believe that I'd get much pushback but I'd be greatly disappointed in this failure. What do you advise?

I commend you for championing this effort to enhance your workplace culture and better engage employees throughout the organization. Yes, our local government organizations are often distracted, new demands are constantly thrown at us, and priorities quickly change. We operate in a “messy” world. While change is accelerating and nonlinear (who anticipated the coronavirus pandemic hitting us at this time?), change for the better takes sustained effort amid all the uncertainty.

I sense that you are passionate about your change initiative. Your change effort is important and perhaps even transformative. Don't quit! Get some “grit.”

What Is Grit?

Angela Duckworth has done extensive research on grit. (See her book [Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance](#), 2016, and her [TED Talk](#) with the same title, and take the 10-question grit assessment by clicking on the link at the end of this column.) Grit has two components: 1) **passion** and 2) **perseverance**. Grit is defined as having passion and perseverance for long-term goals.

Therefore, leaders with grit have passion or a sense of great purpose and a commitment to help or serve others. They also exhibit perseverance, which is resilience or the ability to bounce back from failure, to learn from their mistakes in order to make things better, and to keep going (see [Career Compass No. 9: Bouncing Back From Defeat](#)).

What Is the Value of Grit?

According to Duckworth's research, grit is more valuable than talent or IQ. Leaders who have grit tend to be more successful for the organization, the community, and themselves than those who are more talented or smarter.

"Grit is more valuable than talent or IQ"

In our disruptive world of local government, grit is more important than ever. Given the adaptive and thus contentious challenges we face (i.e., opioid crisis, affordable health care, climate change, pandemics, divisiveness, war for talent, stodgy organizational cultures), any group can partially “veto” or block change for the better. As we pursue important change, we will get ignored or knocked down. Therefore, to get anything done, we need sustained effort led by passionate champions. We need grit.

Positive change is particularly “messy in the middle.” Your team may have generated some support for the change idea or goal, but people may have other priorities or may disagree about the implementation details or timing or next steps. It's messy in the middle and it's easy to give up. Again, grit is critical.

As Duckworth warns, it is a marathon, not a sprint.

When Does Grit Become Important?

In any change journey, there will be twists and turns, ups and downs. Grit becomes important when you become discouraged and question yourself, and your team is disheartened and has little energy left to pursue the vision.

Dan Rockwell suggests that grit comes into play AFTER you want to quit. That is the point when your grit is really tested. (See *Leadership Freak* blog, "[How to Lead Through Turbulence and Uncertainty with Clarity and Confidence](#)," March 18, 2020.)

How Do You Get Grittier?

To become grittier, I suggest the following:

1. Make sure the challenge is aligned with your passion

You don't want to quit if the issue (i.e., improving the organization for the better, engaging and energizing employees) is aligned with your deep-seated values or passions. Everyone is different. In my career, I would not quit if I was addressing a social justice issue. (I had much less perseverance if it was a new technology.)

2. Remember times when you demonstrated grit

To reenergize and reengage yourself, "mine your experiences." Summon up a time or two from your personal or professional life when you persevered amid adversity and did not quit.

Ask yourself:

- What was the challenge and why was it important to me and others?
- What did I do? What adjustments did I make to sustain the effort?
- When things got tough, how was I creative in responding?
- What personal qualities helped me work through the difficulties? How are those qualities relevant today in my current situation?
- What did I learn along the way?
- What was the good that I helped bring about?
- How am I different because I worked through past difficulty? How will I be different after working through this difficulty?
- What made me proud when I worked through all the past adversity and uncertainty? What might I do today that might make me proud when this is over?

If I were to reflect on my past, I would recall the time when our family home burned to the ground. Thankfully, no one was hurt but we lost all our family memorabilia, family photos, and the vintage hats and clothes from my late wife Pam that we were going to give to my daughter Leila. It was the only home that my kids ever knew. I had to pivot from all my professional obligations and focus on supporting my children; finding a new place to live; making it a home; ensuring the kids felt safe; and accepting a lot of help

from family, friends, and colleagues. It was difficult and stressful with many ups and downs and mistakes.

I had to keep going and exhibit grit because it was so important.

3. Recall people who have loved you and supported you

We are all deeply indebted to those who have loved us and supported us throughout our careers and lives. We do not want to disappoint them. We want to make them proud of us.

It is also a good idea to recall those family members, friends, and colleagues who have shown great grit. My mother Rosy was a very gritty lady. She would never, ever give up on anything she cared about. Rosy would never give up on me. I learned a lot from Rosy and certainly would never want to disappoint her.

4. Stretch yourself

You want to stretch yourself and get uncomfortable. Growth does not occur when you are comfortable.

You want to push yourself a bit further than your current capability. Research suggests that your reach should be 4% above your last success. This 4% reach will push you to perform better but won't overwhelm or discourage you. (See LaRae Quay, "[5 Reasons Successful People Need Grit](#)," *SmartBrief* blog, March 21, 2018.)

5. Practice a grit mindset

A grit mindset is a growth mindset. Carol Dweck in her book *Mindset* differentiated between fixed and growth mindsets. A fixed mindset is based on the beliefs that talent is limited; challenges, mistakes, and criticism are to be avoided; and a sense of competency is created by repeating the same tasks over and over again. In contrast, a growth mindset is based on the beliefs that talent is not fixed; it can be expanded through effort and hard work; new challenges are to be embraced; obstacles are identified so they can be overcome; and mistakes and criticism are just opportunities to learn.

A grit mindset is developed over time. Those of us who have this mindset believe that adversity—if we respond to it—can transform us as professionals and people.

“Create a failure resume.”

One way to develop a grit mindset over time is to create a “failure resume.” Either on paper or on your computer, develop not an achievement resume but rather a resume listing personal and professional failures. Also, explore what lessons you learned from each failure and how each experience changed you for the better. (See Tina Seelig, [What I Wished I Knew When I Was 20—A Crash Course In Making Your Place in the World](#), 2010). If you are learning from mistakes and thus making adjustments, you are failing well (LaRae Quay, "[Here Is Why Grit Can Be Important to Your Success](#)," *SmartBrief* blog, Dec

18, 2019).

6. Keep the vision always in mind

In the “messy middle,” you may have to practice patience and flexibility.

Patience doesn’t mean you do nothing. Rather, you use the time wisely. (See [Career Compass No. 75: Patience Is a Leadership Virtue.](#)) For example, you can move your agenda forward by . . .

- Conducting a series of 1:1 conversations with department heads about what is working well with the current performance evaluation system and what is not working well and generating ideas to enhance the process.
- Engaging a cross-section of county employees in focus groups, exploring problems with the existing system and what they desire in any new system.
- Sharing the research and best practices in the employee e-newsletter.
- Organizing an online webinar for the county’s leadership team, featuring private and public sector leaders who can share their experiences and best practices.
- Designing a small beta-test of the new “performance conversation” model so you can learn what works and what does not.

Given people’s ideas, concerns, and any other barriers, you also need to be flexible, pivot, and adapt. Practice **clarity** (about vision) *and* **flexibility** (about how to get there). With your team, take a step or two forward, and always keep the ultimate vision in mind.

7. Get social support

“As a leader, you may feel alone. Don’t isolate yourself.”

In the midst of adversity, we all need social support. I personally would never have survived as a city manager without the ongoing support of other city managers in the region, other top managers in my organization, and family and friends. As a leader, you may feel alone. Don’t isolate yourself. Reach out to a few trusted colleagues and friends; reconnect; share your efforts, frustrations, and fears; and get feedback. Rely on your social posse. (For ideas to address the problem of loneliness on the job, see [Career Compass No. 60: I Don’t Like My Mid-Manager Job!](#))

8. Use a coach

A formal or informal coach can act as a sounding board and suggest ways you can continue to move forward. (See [Career Compass No. 48: How Do I Benefit From a Coach?](#))

9. Get a partner

You don’t have to do all the heavy lifting yourself. Share the leadership role and any burdens. Identify someone who has the same or almost the same commitment and energy for your change initiative, especially if the other person has skills or traits you may not have. For example, you may have great research skills but have difficulty facilitating employee meetings or training managers in new protocols. As a leadership duo, you’ll both be learning and enhancing your skills and making more of a positive impact.

How Do You Help Team Members Get Grittier?

To be successful in an organizational environment, your team members must also get a bit grittier. Here are some ideas:

First, help your team members keep focused on the “big why” of the change project. (See Simon Sinek’s TED Talk “[How Great Leaders Inspire Action](#).”) Ask them to specify what success would look like.

Second, model grit. If you don’t quit, if you demonstrate resilience, if you continue to take a step forward, team members will likely persevere as well.

Third, show some empathy and vulnerability. You show empathy by acknowledging that the project is difficult, the team has concerns, and team members are disheartened by the lack of commitment by top management to move forward. In trying to be empathetic, don’t then say “but”—say “and.” “But” negates what the other person is saying. Rather, say: “I know that we are discouraged by the initial response to our project. I, too, am disappointed. And I believe that we can take some small steps to move the project forward and make a difference.” (Dan Rockwell, *Leadership Freak* blog, “[How to Talk with Anxious People](#),” March 12, 2020.)

By hearing that you, too, are disappointed by the initial response, you also show some vulnerability. Vulnerability creates connection. People are more likely to follow and deal with adversity if they feel connected to you as the leader.

Fourth, speak confidently. Amid all the uncertainty, communicate with confidence about moving forward. Even if you are uncertain about the outcome of taking action, you cannot demonstrate uncertainty or anxiety. If you show anxiety, you will transmit it to team members or other stakeholders. (See Allison Shapiro, “[How To Reassure Your Team When the News Is Scary](#),” *hbr.org*, March 5, 2020.)

Fifth, engage the team in self-reflection. Ask team members to share past situations when they encountered but overcame adversity and what they learned about themselves (see the questions above prompting self-reflection).

To help teammates reflect, ask people to share stories of when they had the purpose and stamina to persevere and achieve an important goal over time. Stories are powerful ways to teach and learn.

Sixth, welcome ideas. Don’t seek buy-in; rather, ask team members to suggest one or two small steps forward and be open to the suggestions. Get the team’s “fingerprints” on the plan.

As Dan Rockwell asserts, “listening increases your influence.” (*Leadership Freak* blog, “[Anticipation As a Leadership Advantage](#),” Aug 4, 2017.)

Sixth, continue to debrief with the team. As you make adjustments, ask the team to debrief the ongoing experience:

- What is going well?
- What is not going so well?
- How do we creatively overcome some of the obstacles that we are encountering?
- What are we learning?
- What adjustments do we make?
- What is our next step?

Finally, focus on progress. In a messy world, it takes time and lots of effort and adjustments to achieve success. It is easy for change teams to lose momentum and energy. Therefore, help the team identify milestones and see progress along the way. And then of course celebrate progress with ice cream for all.

When Does Stubbornness Become Pigheadedness?

Successful leaders need to be “stubborn” about important values and goals. Consider the grittiness and stubbornness of Winston Churchill or Mahatma Gandhi.

However, you don’t want to become pigheaded and lose your followers.

Here are some indicators of pigheadedness:

- You never change your mind.
- Everyone doesn’t understand—they just don’t get it.
- Because you are right, you talk the loudest and longest in meetings.
- You don’t appreciate diversity in thinking or ways of doing things.
- You forget big picture goals and spend too much time demanding that people do things the way you want them done.
- You blame others for any missteps or opposition.

(See Dan Rockwell, *Leadership Freak* blog, “[7 Ways To Be Pigheaded Without Being a Jackass](#),” June 3, 2016.)

Persistence does have a dark side. Caroline Adams Miller calls this “[stupid grit](#).” The key is to be stubborn about the right things *and* open to different perspectives, ideas, and ways of doing things in order to achieve the vision. As Dan Rockwell suggests in his *Leadership Freak* blog (June 3, 2016), the best way to be appropriately gritty and avoid pigheadedness is to practice “persistence with openness.”

Got Grit?

If you want to make a difference in the uncertain and messy world of local government, you must be gritty, exhibiting passion and perseverance. Grit is more important than talent or intelligence.

I'll end with two quotes:

"Don't let what you cannot do stop you from you can do." John Wooden, former UCLA basketball coach

"Life's challenges are not supposed to paralyze you, they're supposed to help you discover who you are." Bernice Johnson Reagon, song composer, performer, and social activist

Assess Your Grit

As part of her work on grit, Angela Duckworth has developed a ten question "Grit Scale."

Take this simple grit assessment [here](#).



Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, *ICMA Career Compass* is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly

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