

# LEVERAGING GRIT FOR LEADERSHIP SUCCESS

*by Laurie Sudbrink*

**A**cross all industries, no matter what size, no matter what industry segment or location—we're all being forced to do more with less, and leaders are expected to make it all happen. Schools are recognizing the importance of "grit" through the valuable research by University of Pennsylvania psychologist Angela Duckworth, and workplaces continue to demand it. We can't just expect people to be invincible.

In my experience working with thousands of leaders over numerous years, many of them have had the traditional characteristic of "grit": the toughness, the tenacity, and the perseverance. But frequently they leave people in the dust, often with collateral damage, while valuable time and resources are wasted as others are picking up the pieces and putting it all back together.

It's obvious that the old command-and-control style isn't cutting it. Although most agree we need a blend of leadership and management, many of the executives I've worked with have needed to vastly increase the ratio of time spent on leading versus managing. They've learned to be great managers. They are good at telling, but not so good at asking. They have mastered

managing tasks, but neglect to inspire people. They've gotten very good at planning, organizing, taking action, and tracking, but they aren't spending time fully listening, recognizing, and developing people.

To get the results that are in demand today, those in leadership positions to lead more than manage, and they need more than just traditional "grit" to do this—they need GRIT®.

## The Paradox of GRIT

In today's workplace, it's true, we still need tough characters—but with Generosity, Respect, Integrity, and Truth. So yes, there is a paradox with GRIT.

*We can't just expect people  
to be invincible.*



**FIGURE 1. THE GRIT CHARACTERISTICS**

We're asking for courage, toughness, and resilience, mixed with softer characteristics: being generous, respectful, and having integrity and self-awareness of one's truth.

While each GRIT characteristic—generosity, respect, integrity and truth—stands alone as a crucial leadership trait, they are uniquely combined, creating a way of leading our own life. As said by William Wallace in one of my favorite movies, *Braveheart* (1995), “Every man dies. Not every man really lives.”

We start with Truth in Figure 1—The GRIT Characteristics, because this is the core. When you know and accept your truth, align with integrity, and respect yourself and others, you are more generous with your time and resources, but not at the expense of yourself. And this results in grit, but not at the expense of others.

GRIT not only impacts the way you lead your organization, but it will affect every aspect of your life—your family, your social life and your personal journey. By living this way, it leaves no room for regrets and you will authentically lead others.

What GRIT boils down to is the ability to be more human and genuine instead of hiding behind the mask of professionalism. I worked with a CEO of a mid-sized law firm in New York who embodied GRIT.

I was putting together a customized 360-degree feedback survey for him to gather feedback on his performance and data to be used for succession planning. This CEO invited the entire firm to take part. We included the firm's values: integrity, respect, teamwork, and ingenuity. A couple of the members on his advisement team asked him if he really wanted to open himself up to that. Without hesitation he said, “I want to hear their perception, and I want everyone to feel they had a chance to give their view in a safe environment.” The response rate and the results were the highest I have ever seen, with almost a perfect 5 out of a possible 5 on integrity and respect!

The softer characteristics of GRIT—generosity, respect, integrity and truth—create a healthy toughness and perseverance in our leadership that involves the team rather than leaving them in the dust. GRIT provides the foundation that inspires people to step up, take ownership, create solutions, and make things happen—with sustainable results!

## It Starts with Truth

Leading courageously, making the tough decisions, staying the course, and not getting distracted by financial pressures are a few of the challenges leaders must face. Over the years CEOs have shared with me that their ability to do these things has been grounded by their alignment to themselves and clarity of their purpose.

It starts with knowing your own truth—personally and organizationally. Focusing only on the direction of the company and emphasizing that repeatedly will not create authentic generosity. People don't rally

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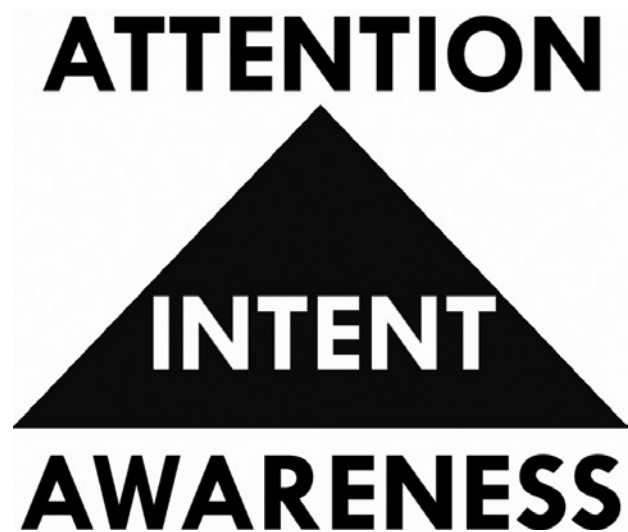
behind words, or even organizations. It's the energy, the purpose, and the intent of the leader that shines through the words and moves people to action. We wonder why vision statements often don't make an impact. It's more about the lack of alignment than the quality of the vision. Alignment starts with knowing your personal "*why*." You have clarity of purpose, you are fully aligned to your truth, and you are courageously living it. This is what in turn will align the team around the vision and make it a reality.

It takes self-awareness to get to your truth and to have clarity of purpose and awareness of your own passions, priorities, and intent. When we are aware of our intent, we know what is driving our actions, and it helps align us to our truth. Then we can choose where to focus our attention, as the Triangle of Intent in Figure 2 illustrates. Without self-awareness, we react instead of mindfully aligning our actions to what the situation requires.

There's an old story about a hunter who is walking through the woods. He comes across hundreds of large colorful targets painted on all kinds of trees and is amazed to see that all of the arrows on all of the targets have hit the bull's-eyes! Never a miss! The hunter wanders near and far, anxious to meet this perfect marksman. Finally he finds him and asks, "Please tell me, what is the secret behind your perfect aim? You never miss!" The archer smiles and replies, "It is really quite simple. First I shoot my arrows. Then I paint the targets."

If we don't have direction and purpose, if we allow financial pressures and other things to distract us, we'll be painting our targets afterward, and it will be extremely difficult to keep people aligned and motivated.

Awareness allows us the opportunity to look inside objectively. We can then question our intent and shift it if necessary. We can make any change we see necessary. Like anything else—learning to walk, ride a bike, swim, play the drums, or be a great leader—we need to put our attention to it, and put action to it. Practice. Making this shift internally will make a profound impact externally.



**FIGURE 2.** THE TRIANGLE OF INTENT

## Intentional Leadership

The way we lead is often linked to our life experiences and the stories we've created around those experiences. We need to look inside, perhaps change the story, align our behavior, and lead more intentionally. Intentional leadership occurs when a leader is aligned through integrity to her truth. When we are clear on our purpose or our meaning in life, our intent is positive and productive, and our actions are focused in the right areas. When we are not clear—or perhaps we just aren't being mindful—our intent can be coming from a place of confusion or fear, and can be harmful rather than helpful. For example, an executive gets frustrated and lashes out, the intent may be to punish or maybe to get even. But if this executive keeps mindful of his purpose, for example to help people develop and grow, then the frustration will serve as awareness and he will stop and align to his truth. He will choose the appropriate actions that will help the person change.

A partner at an accounting firm with whom I worked shared with me that he prided himself in being completely honest, direct, and telling it like it is. He felt this was the only way to be, and in fact, he showed how it traced to truth and integrity in the GRIT model. What we discovered through our sessions was that he was forgetting about respect. He didn't realize that

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*It takes practice to be aware.*

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he blurted things out that weren't even relevant and quite frankly came across as disrespectful. He would also say things to direct reports that were perceived as condescending. He spent most of his time telling people what to do rather than asking and listening. I learned from him that this style was what he grew up with. His dad was exactly like this. By looking at his truth, and then his purpose and intent, he realized he wanted to change the story, and change his behavior. He wanted to be an intentional leader.

## The Practice of Self-Reflection

It takes practice to be aware. Putting time aside to self-reflect is imperative for leaders, yet so many are rushing at such a pace that they create fires that everyone ends up having to deal with. Investing time upfront to reflect and realign saves energy and resources in the long run.

From time to time through your self-reflection you may bump into your ego. Your ego is not really your true self, the core of who you are. Your ego is driven by fear. Although ego does play an important role in protection at certain times, the danger is that it wants power and control. Our true self is the perfect balance of confidence and humility, not dominated by fear. Keeping your ego in place helps you look objectively and make the changes you desire.

A lot of this involves emotional intelligence, having self-awareness of our own emotions and an awareness and appreciation of others. Empathy doesn't come naturally to everyone, and it typically comes up as a practice area with many of the leaders I work with. Too often I see executive-level leaders avoiding situations that involve emotion or that they think might result in something emotional. In fact, this can be the biggest reason they

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avoid the practice of self-reflection. With GRIT, you no longer avoid the sticky uncomfortable conversations or situations (the emotional stuff). You have clarity, your intent is helpful, and you respect situations and people and deliver the message respectfully.

As mentioned before, once you have awareness and you decide it is something you want to change, it just takes mindfulness and practice. When we notice an attribute we want to change about ourselves, the underlying thought that we should be perfect often gets in the way (there's that ego again).

Too often leaders put themselves under so much pressure to perform to perfection, but, ironically, if they were more transparent, people would connect with them and trust them even more. It's not about being perfect, at least not that unattainable definition of perfection that most of us strive for. As George Orwell said, "The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection." Instead, it's about doing our best, continuously growing and learning and not being afraid to show some vulnerability.

If we spend the time to understand our own limitations and strengths, and respect that we all have them, we'll feel more comfortable with being vulnerable. For instance, a CFO I was coaching revealed to me that one of the things she hated doing the most was holding people accountable. After talking about it a bit, I asked her if she would consider letting her team know about this. At first she resisted and thought that it would make her appear weak and they may take advantage of her. After considering it from the other side—perhaps her boss sharing something like this with her and the team—she realized it would help people see that she



**FIGURE 3. WILEY'S EVERYTHING DISCWORK OF LEADERS**

**NOTE:** "DiSC," "Everything DiSC," "Everything DiSC Work of Leaders," and "Wiley" are registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

is real and that she trusts them enough to reveal this to them. A few months later she reported that not only were people opening up more to her and she was feeling less resistance, but they were stepping up and holding themselves more accountable!

## One of the Biggest Mistakes Is to Not Adapt

Leaders are required to have a whole set of characteristics and skills, and we're all going to have some that are easier for us and others that are more challenging. Take for example the interpersonal characteristics of leadership as defined in Wiley's Everything DiSCWork of Leaders®. (See Figure 3.) The eight traits are all important to leadership: pioneering, energizing, affirming, inclusive, humble, deliberate, resolute, and commanding. Our personality has an influence on our leadership tendencies; some of these will come more naturally, and some will take more energy and effort.

It's crucial that we are aware of our natural tendencies, we recognize when we need to use an opposing behavior, and we are able to act on it. If you are naturally strong in one behavior, you may have a more

difficult time with the opposite. For the majority of us, it's a matter of mindfulness and discipline. If we are mindful of what a situation or person needs, and it's a behavior that does not come natural to us, we may have to exert more energy to act upon it. And it may feel awkward, so we might have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable.

One of the biggest mistakes that most leaders make is to get comfortable in their own style and tendencies and not adapt to people and situations. For example, if you are very commanding and pioneering, it may take a lot of energy to be humble, and it may feel unnatural. Many leaders have to work on self-awareness because they don't even realize that the situation or person requires humbleness. Some leaders have expressed to me that they understand that they need to adjust, but it feels fake and they're afraid people will perceive it as manipulative. That's where being genuine and sharing your vulnerabilities, and letting go of the need to be perfect, come into play.

When leaders are self-aware and adapt to others, this shows respect and creates a generosity that is aligned and authentic. People feel that you care about them, and this breeds trust and loyalty. A CFO I reported

to nearly twenty-five years ago would take the time to connect, even when I could tell he was extremely busy and we were under intense financial pressures. Although the pace of the office felt like Grand Central Station, he would stop and calmly say hello and check in to see how I was doing. He would take the time to listen. He cared. To this day, if he needed a favor, I wouldn't hesitate to help him.

## Give and You Will Receive

Generosity happens more naturally and genuinely when you align to your truth with integrity and you respect yourself and others. You can then give authentically. It isn't forced. It's not that you *have* to, you *want* to. You want to help others get aligned to the vision. You want to develop them into the leaders they have the potential to be. This is not only for their own personal growth but also for yours, and consequently this produces growth and spectacular results for the organization.

With GRIT, you give the people you lead a part of you. It's not just your words and the tasks you delegate, but the energy, the passion, and the belief you have in them that engages them. Through your generosity, by giving to them, you get more. They trust you. They want to follow you. They are committed and their energy, and creativity will propel your organization to new heights.



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