The Anatomy of Determination

September 2009Like all investors, we spend a lot of time trying to learn how to  
predict which startups will succeed. We probably spend more time  
thinking about it than most, because we invest the earliest.  
Prediction is usually all we have to rely on.We learned quickly that the most important predictor of success is  
determination. At first we thought it might be intelligence.  
Everyone likes to believe that's what makes startups succeed. It  
makes a better story that a company won because its founders were  
so smart. The PR people and reporters who spread such stories  
probably believe them themselves. But while it certainly helps to  
be smart, it's not the deciding factor. There are plenty of people  
as smart as Bill Gates who achieve nothing.In most domains, talent is overrated compared to determination—partly  
because it makes a better story, partly because it gives onlookers  
an excuse for being lazy, and partly because after a while determination  
starts to look like talent.I can't think of any field in which determination is overrated, but  
the relative importance of determination and talent probably do  
vary somewhat. Talent probably matters more in types of work that  
are purer, in the sense that one is solving mostly a single type  
of problem instead of many different types. I suspect determination  
would not take you as far in math as it would in, say, organized  
crime.I don't mean to suggest by this comparison that types of work that  
depend more on talent are always more admirable. Most people would  
agree it's more admirable to be good at math than memorizing long  
strings of digits, even though the latter depends more on natural  
ability.Perhaps one reason people believe startup founders win by being  
smarter is that intelligence does matter more in technology startups  
than it used to in earlier types of companies. You probably do  
need to be a bit smarter to dominate Internet search than you had  
to be to dominate railroads or hotels or newspapers. And that's  
probably an ongoing trend. But even in the highest of high tech  
industries, success still depends more on determination than brains.If determination is so important, can we isolate its components?  
Are some more important than others? Are there some you can  
cultivate?The simplest form of determination is sheer willfulness. When you  
want something, you must have it, no matter what.A good deal of willfulness must be inborn, because it's common to  
see families where one sibling has much more of it than another.  
Circumstances can alter it, but at the high end of the scale, nature  
seems to be more important than nurture. Bad circumstances can  
break the spirit of a strong-willed person, but I don't think there's  
much you can do to make a weak-willed person stronger-willed.Being strong-willed is not enough, however. You also have to be  
hard on yourself. Someone who was strong-willed but self-indulgent  
would not be called determined. Determination implies your willfulness  
is balanced by discipline.That word balance is a significant one. The more willful you are,  
the more disciplined you have to be. The stronger your will, the  
less anyone will be able to argue with you except yourself. And  
someone has to argue with you, because everyone has base impulses,  
and if you have more will than discipline you'll just give into  
them and end up on a local maximum like drug addiction.We can imagine will and discipline as two fingers squeezing a  
slippery melon seed. The harder they squeeze, the further the seed  
flies, but they must both squeeze equally or the seed spins off  
sideways.If this is true it has interesting implications, because discipline  
can be cultivated, and in fact does tend to vary quite a lot in the  
course of an individual's life. If determination is effectively  
the product of will and discipline, then you can become more  
determined by being more disciplined.  
[1]Another consequence of the melon seed model is that the more willful  
you are, the more dangerous it is to be undisciplined. There seem  
to be plenty of examples to confirm that. In some very energetic  
people's lives you see something like wing flutter, where they  
alternate between doing great work and doing absolutely nothing.  
Externally this would look a lot like bipolar disorder.The melon seed model is inaccurate in at least one respect, however:  
it's static. In fact the dangers of indiscipline increase with  
temptation. Which means, interestingly, that determination tends  
to erode itself. If you're sufficiently determined to achieve great  
things, this will probably increase the number of temptations around  
you. Unless you become proportionally more disciplined, willfulness  
will then get the upper hand, and your achievement will revert to  
the mean.That's why Shakespeare's Caesar thought thin men so dangerous. They weren't  
tempted by the minor perquisites of power.The melon seed model implies it's possible to be too disciplined.  
Is it? I think there probably are people whose willfulness is  
crushed down by excessive discipline, and who would achieve more  
if they weren't so hard on themselves. One reason the young sometimes  
succeed where the old fail is that they don't realize how incompetent  
they are. This lets them do a kind of deficit spending. When they  
first start working on something, they overrate their achievements.  
But that gives them confidence to keep working, and their performance  
improves. Whereas someone clearer-eyed would see their initial  
incompetence for what it was, and perhaps be discouraged from  
continuing.There's one other major component of determination: ambition. If  
willfulness and discipline are what get you to your destination,  
ambition is how you choose it.I don't know if it's exactly right to say that ambition is a component  
of determination, but they're not entirely orthogonal. It would  
seem a misnomer if someone said they were very determined to do  
something trivially easy.And fortunately ambition seems to be quite malleable; there's a lot  
you can do to increase it. Most people don't know how ambitious  
to be, especially when they're young. They don't know what's hard,  
or what they're capable of. And this problem is exacerbated by  
having few peers. Ambitious people are rare, so if everyone is  
mixed together randomly, as they tend to be early in people's lives,  
then the ambitious ones won't have many ambitious peers. When you  
take people like this and put them together with other ambitious  
people, they bloom like dying plants given water. Probably most  
ambitious people are starved for the sort of encouragement they'd  
get from ambitious peers, whatever their age.  
[2]Achievements also tend to increase your ambition. With each step  
you gain confidence to stretch further next time.So here in sum is how determination seems to work: it consists of  
willfulness balanced with discipline, aimed by ambition. And  
fortunately at least two of these three qualities can be cultivated.  
You may be able to increase your strength of will somewhat; you can  
definitely learn self-discipline; and almost everyone is practically  
malnourished when it comes to ambition.I feel like I understand determination a bit better now. But only  
a bit: willfulness, discipline, and ambition are all concepts almost  
as complicated as determination.  
[3]Note too that determination and talent are not the whole story.  
There's a third factor in achievement: how much you like the work.  
If you really love working on something,  
you don't need determination to drive you; it's what you'd do anyway.  
But most types of work have aspects one doesn't like, because most  
types of work consist of doing things for other people, and it's  
very unlikely that the tasks imposed by their needs will happen to  
align exactly with what you want to do.Indeed, if you want to create the most wealth,  
the way to do it is to focus more on their needs than your interests,  
and make up the difference with determination.Notes[1]  
Loosely speaking. What I'm claiming with the melon seed model  
is more like determination is proportionate to wd^m - k|w - d|^n,  
where w is will and d discipline.[2]  
Which means one of the best ways to help a society generally  
is to create events and institutions that bring ambitious  
people together. It's like pulling the control rods out of a  
reactor: the energy they emit encourages other ambitious people,  
instead of being absorbed by the normal people they're usually  
surrounded with.Conversely, it's probably a mistake to do as some European countries  
have done and try to ensure none of your universities is significantly  
better than the others.[3]  
For example, willfulness clearly has two subcomponents,  
stubbornness and energy. The first alone yields someone who's  
stubbornly inert. The second alone yields someone flighty.  
As willful people get older or otherwise lose their energy, they  
tend to become merely stubborn.  
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