

GRIT It Up!

How do you lead your people to bust through the crud and get more of the important stuff done, and done well, when the entire world is conspiring against that happening?

BY PAUL G. STOLTZ, PhD

Ultimately, there's only one way to get there. You have to tap into your GRIT—your capacity to dig deep and do whatever it takes to achieve your most important, long-term goals—and lead in an entirely new way.

This article will equip you with four vital factors that help you to lead with greater agility, creativity, and fortitude. There are self-reflective questions for each factor that you can easily convert into tools to help everyone get more done. Let's start with a hard look at the trends.

Completion erosion syndrome

Completion erosion is real. In 2010, my team at PEAK Learning did a survey of 29,000 leaders, and 82% of them reported they were getting a lower percentage of their stuff done. We have found that the trend is consistently upward, with the latest data crunch, which we did in December 2014 with roughly 1,250 leaders, showing that 91% now report they are getting a lower percentage of their stuff done. And this affects all facets of their jobs and their lives.

The problem is not limited to leaders. According to our most recent findings from a study of 1,540 employees in January 2015, 86% are completing a lower percentage of their assigned tasks compared with the past. (Note: These latest findings are part of an ongoing, 11-year survey of more than 500,000 individuals in 63 countries.) Even that number may be low. Based on the latest 2015 data, leaders are reporting that, in reality, closer to 97% of their people are completing comparatively less of what they signed up to do.



Most leaders, and the majority of people reading this article, read less than half of their emails. On a good day, they respond to 25% to 40% of the messages they receive. We base these findings on live groups that we have surveyed across industries since 2011. Our latest data, based on responses from 2,850 sales and functional leaders on January 9, 2015, revealed that leaders read beyond the subject line on only one-third of their

emails. They respond to only about 20% of all emails received.

When asked why this is so, the most common answer is some version of, "Because it is humanly impossible to respond to everyone and get everything done." You may feel similarly. Is it really any different for your people?

Is it any wonder leaders struggle harder than ever to keep their people fully engaged, let alone deliver on the objec-

tives for which they are held accountable and on which their raise, bonus, retention, and promotion rely? How motivating is it to show up to work every day, work longer and harder than ever, and feel less and less accomplished, with virtually no true sense of completion? It's like climbing an endless mountain, with each new twist in the trail revealing an ever higher, and probably false, summit.

Weather on the mountain

During the 28 years since I formed PEAK Learning, I've asked groups at all levels, including leaders around the world, to look on the horizon and tell me their weather forecast. I challenge them with these questions: Are things becoming more predictable or more uncertain? Easier or tougher? Simpler or more complex? Faster or slower? More or less demanding?

And for 28 years, a composite of 98% of nearly 1 million people have answered that things are tougher, more complex, and slower. This trend held strong in January 2015, with 98.5% of 2,850 people answering similarly. Arguably, for 28 years, they've also been correct.

Add to that a more recent trend which argues that a shift must be made from resilience to GRIT. Since 2012, I've been asking groups worldwide these additional questions:

Compared with the past 5 or 10 years, does getting stuff done require:

- More or less time?
- More or less frustration?
- Greater or lesser struggle?
- More or less effort?
- More or less tenacity?

Of the roughly 48,000 people surveyed from six continents, 98% have said that tasks involve more time, more frustration, greater struggle, more effort, and more tenacity. Those respondents include the most recent batch of 2,850 individuals in January 2015. In a recent session, when a single individual contrarily announced, "I disagree. I think most tasks actually require less effort and time than before," the group's stunned amazement quickly turned to laughter when someone toward the back shouted out, "Gee, I'd like to have some of whatever you're smoking!"



Getting stuff done clearly involves greater frustration, struggle, time, effort, and energy. In short, what once took mere guts and resilience now requires a serious dose of the right brand of true GRIT.

Grit versus GRIT

Common grit, or what we'll call "grit 1.0," is the kind we talk about in everyday conversation. Grit is vital to success. It refers to the basic quantity or level of persistence and effort a person shows toward a goal. Two common questions asked regarding grit are, "How much grit do you (or does anyone) have?" and "Can a person have too much grit?"

GRIT is the proposed upgrade, based on my team's global research. It is what we refer to as "GRIT 2.0," and it encompasses both quantity and quality. As it turns out, quality can often trump quantity when it comes to leading innovatively and getting more stuff done in an ever more demanding world. With GRIT, the new questions become, "What kind of GRIT do you (or does anyone) show?" and "How can you improve your GRIT to enhance your contribution and results?"

To answer these and other vital questions, we need to morph our mental model from the two-dimensional grit

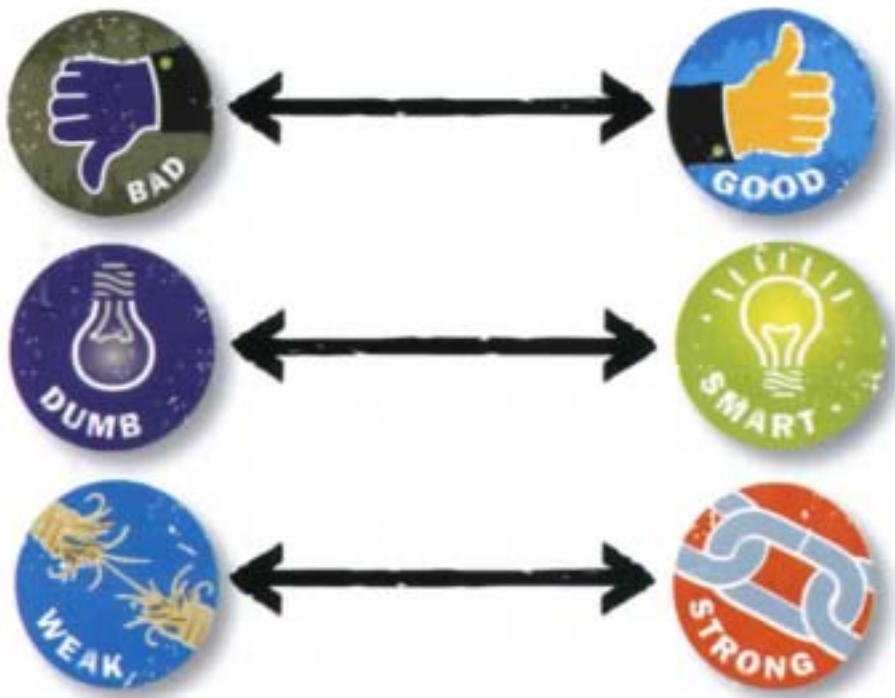
continuum to the three-dimensional "GRIT Cube" (see illustration above). This shows how the four factors below play into the GRIT cube.

Factor 1 Choose smart over dumb GRIT

You may have witnessed "dumb GRIT" if you've ever known that person or team that pounds their head(s) to a bloody pulp, screaming to the heavens, "We never quit! Never say die!" With dumb GRIT, we pursue what are usually less than optimal goals in less than optimal ways. In its extreme, we go after the wrong stuff in stupid ways.

"Smart GRIT" is the opposite. It is defined as "pursuing the best possible goals (or versions of those goals) in the smartest, best ways."

The contrast between dumb GRIT and smart GRIT is easy to spot. On a recent business trip, I watched a red-faced, clearly irate customer complain about his increasingly delayed flight. No matter what explanations or alternatives the gate agent patiently offered, he simply repeated his mantra-like demand verbatim: "I paid for this seat. I will have this seat. I paid to get there on time. And you will get me there on



time!" At least five times he repeated the exact words, with his feet planted wide and arms folded defiantly across his chest. Hewasa bit more emphatic each time, as if the agent's answer would change if he said it one more time. It was like watching a woodpecker trying to penetrate steel.

While this was happening, I watched a smartly dressed young businesswoman next to me whip out her phone and casually tap and swipe a few times. Then, with a satisfied grin, she gathered her belongings and confided, "I mean, really. What's the big deal? I just got booked on a backup flight that leaves in 30 minutes." As she motioned toward the guy causing the scene, she added, "Some people just amaze me."

As an exercise, to achieve smart GRIT, ask yourself, "What, if any, adjustments can I/we make to either the goal itself or the way we are going after the goal to at least increase our pace and potential success in achieving it?"

Factor 2 Go with good GRIT

Sometimes leaders go after the right goals in the wrong ways. And the more intense the situation becomes, the easier

it is to adopt a damn-the-consequences mindset in order to achieve the goal. Chances are, you've known or at least witnessed that kind of leader somewhere along your journey. Notice that when it comes to "bad GRIT" versus "good GRIT," the key word is not "intentions," it's "consequences."

Harmful versus beneficial consequences spell the difference. The degree

to which you relentlessly pursue goals in ways that are, even unintentionally, detrimental to others is the degree to which you demonstrate bad GRIT. The degree to which the way you go after your goals benefits yourself and others is the degree of good GRIT you are likely showing.

One CEO I worked with had a full-time psychotherapist housed on the executive floor, purely to talk people off the ledge

after the CEO unleashed yet another of his signature scathing, abusive rants on one of his key people. Tons of GRIT. Just the wrong brand. His results were stunningly impressive. How he got them, much less so.

To get good GRIT, ask, "How can I/we go after our goals to maximize the upside (good) and minimize the downside (bad) effects our efforts have on me/us/others?"

Factor 3 Show strong GRIT

At the end of the day (or week, quarter, fiscal year), the sheer magnitude of GRIT you show matters tremendously. Agreeing with or pontificating about GRIT vehemently is immaterial in comparison to demonstrating it relentlessly, and in chronically massive doses. GRIT is not a binary on/off light switch. It is more akin to a dimmer, with adjustable levels of intensity.

If GRIT is your capacity to dig deep and do whatever it takes—even suffer, struggle, sacrifice—to achieve your most worthy goals, then how deep you dig and for how long matter, as does how much struggle, sacrifice, and suffering you're willing to endure to make it happen.

A professor I recently encountered was an impressively quick study on GRIT—its various dimensions, facets, and

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so on. She could give an effective lecture on it and even map out how, behaviorally, she demonstrated good, smart GRIT. The reason she could not get university bureaucracy to approve her new course was not that she lacked an appreciation for or understanding of GRIT, but rather that she showed, at best, modest levels of it across the board. She showed the right GRIT, just not enough of it to achieve her goals.

To effectively show GRIT, ask, “How and where can we best amplify the intensity and duration of our GRIT to help at least increase the chances that we achieve our objective(s)?”

Factor 4 Optimize robustness

Ever notice how cheap sandpaper wears down extra fast? Its initial strong grit is quickly depleted. Superior sandpaper maintains its grit after countless demands. How well do you hold up over time? To what degree do you maintain your best self regardless of how much GRIT life requires?

This missing element in the discussion and implementation of GRIT is the wear-and-tear factor, called “robustness.” In the world of material science, robustness is “the capacity of a structure to maintain its ideal state despite the unexpected perturbations that may assault it.” If you build a home in Joplin, Missouri, you plan for tornadoes. How well that home holds up when the primeval fault line under Missouri acti-

vates a 7.6 earthquake is how robust the structure truly is.


The same is true for leaders, their organizations, and their people. In fact, as the trends show things becoming more frustrating, protracted, demanding, and difficult, robustness shifts to the foreground of what great leaders strive to nurture—first in themselves and then in the teams and organizations they lead. When is the last time you saw a second-generation photocopy be any sharper or brighter than the first? In the same sense, how dare we as leaders require more staying power, fortitude, and true GRIT from our people than we do from ourselves? Great leaders are in it for the long haul, the marathon versus the sprint.

Ask yourself, “How can I adjust the way we pursue our objectives in order to minimize the detrimental wear and tear it has on everyone, over time?”

Gritty leadership

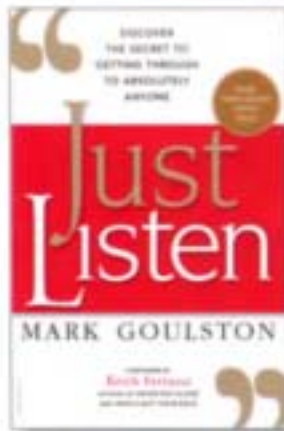
As a leader, you will discover that when you put these four factors into action, you can overcome completion erosion and

achieve the almost unimaginable. You can dramatically increase the pace and the chances of taking on and achieving the most arduous aspirations.

These four factors will fuel your quest to lead with greater agility, creativity, and fortitude, and they will equip you for the ultimate quest, which is not only to demonstrate more GRIT but to achieve optimal GRIT. You’ll know you’re there when you find yourself demonstrating your smartest, best, strongest GRIT across all dimensions, in all situations, in order to achieve your most important and highest ambitions. Bold ideas and solid strategy are just the start. Ultimately, it takes some serious GRIT to lead others and get the important stuff done, no matter how intensely the world can conspire against those results. 

Paul G. Stoltz, PhD, is founder and CEO of Peak Learning Inc. As director of the Global Resilience and GRIT Institutes, Stoltz oversees a research agenda in 29 countries dedicated to exploring, expanding, and advancing the applications of GRIT to strengthen people and their organizations.

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