Federal Judicial Center

In Session: Leading the Judiciary Episode 17

Grit: How Hard Work, Not Talent, Predicts Success Interview with Angela Duckworth

Lori: Coming up:

Dr. Angela Duckworth: We love prodigies. Like we love watching YouTube videos of four-year olds who are doing things that make you feel like they're magical and that they're not like you and that they're gifted in a way that you weren't. I think the most important thing to understand is that it's a dangerous idea to get obsessed with that as an explanation for why people are great because hidden I think are thousands of hours of really effortful practice and dedication.

Lori: In today's episode, we'll explore grit, a combination of passion and perseverance that our guest says is more important than natural talent for achieving goals and predicting success. Her research shows that though natural talent is fixed, grit can be developed and grit can lead to far better individual and organizational outcomes than our reliance on natural talent alone. We're talking today with Dr. Angela Duckworth, a 2013 MacArthur Fellow and professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Duckworth is also the founder and CEO of Character Lab, a nonprofit whose mission is to advance the science and practice of character development. She completed an MSc in neuroscience at Oxford and a PhD in psychology at the

University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Duckworth has advised many organizations, including the World Bank, NBA and NFL teams and fortune 500 companies. And she's also the author of the bestselling book we'll discuss today, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*. Our host for today's episode is Michael Siegel, Senior Education Specialist at the Federal Judicial center. Michael, take it away.

Michael Siegel: Thanks, Lori. Thanks for joining us today, Angela.

Dr. Angela Duckworth: Thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here, Michael. Michael Siegel: So, what is grit? And how is it different from resilience or stubbornness?
Dr. Angela Duckworth: I'm a research psychologist who's been trying to understand, what do high achievers have in common. And in my research, I have found that this combination of passion and perseverance for really long-term goals, ends up being a common denominator, whether you're an Olympic athlete like Lindsey Vonn or a Nobel Prize winning scientist like Marie Curie, there is this kind of tenacity with what you're working on and how consistently and hard you're working on it. I'm often asked like, “Okay, that sounds like resilience. Is it the same thing?” And actually, my doctoral advisor, when I was getting my PhD in psychology is a fellow named Marty Seligman, who is somebody who I think discovered 50 plus years ago, what is resilience, first in animals and then in people. So what resilience is, at least the way Marty

would talk about it is that when you have a really stressful experience that is in part out of your control, do you selectively think about the fact that you can't control it and that probably your life is ruined? Or do you focus on the part of the situation that you can learn from and that you can control in the future. And that's the foundation of resilience. And the opposite of resilience is he would call learned helplessness. And so, you can think of those as two different reactions to the same situation. There is a connection between resilience and grit. And it's not just because I happen to have been in his lab and that is, I think that when you ask the question, like, what are these really gritty people doing that helps them or encourages them to stay with the same goal for decades and to work so hard, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and in many cases, Saturday, and sometimes Sunday? I think resilience is a part of grit. If you don't have a resilient response to adversity, it's hard to imagine how you could be gritty for years, but I don't think it's all of grit. I think there are other things too.

Michael Siegel: And you mentioned the diversity of environments research has found that grit exists in, environments as diverse as the West Point Military Academy and the National Scripps spelling bee. How is grit manifest in these very diverse settings?

Dr. Angela Duckworth: You know, my intuition, of course, I haven't studied all human settings and nor will I but my

intuition is that there are going to be examples of grit in every setting, that in any group of people, you're going to find individuals who are uncommonly tenacious about what they care about and how they're striving toward it. In particular though, you're right, I've studied West Point and I've studied the National Spelling Bee and I took them as paradigmatic settings where things are really hard. And we start it off with you were really committed but are you still committed after things are unfolding and sometimes not in your favor. So, for example, in the National Spelling Bee, most of those children and they are children, their ages 7 to 14. It's an unusual sport to be officially aged out, which are like 15 years old. But these kids typically will compete year after year. And as we all could figure out most of them will not be champions. And so, they have to come back again, then go back the day after the National Spelling Bee and ask themselves do I want to keep studying words and then come back again.

And the year that I completed a study with Anders Ericsson, there was a winner named Carrie Close. And it was her fifth year of competition like thousands of hours accumulated over a year. So, I think it's obvious to study grit in a setting like that. But in all kinds of settings, because life is hard and achieving anything, I really believe takes consistent effort.

Michael Siegel: We often have a preference or we respect natural talent more than we respect grit. Why is this misplaced in your view?

Dr. Angela Duckworth: I've been wondering whether it's a uniquely American mythology of the natural, right. And I've lately been convinced that it can't be just the United States that has this affection for somebody who is like a natural genius. Like somebody that- we love prodigies, like, we love watching YouTube videos of like four year olds who are doing things that make you feel like they're magical, and that they're not like you and that they're gifted in a way that you weren't and therefore, as Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19th century German philosopher would

have said, “Like, here, I do not have to compete.” And I think that's the underlying psychology of the myth of genius is that when we set aside Usain Bolt, or name your favorite person who you think like, I'll never be like that person, you don't have to compete, you don't have to try to be like them because you weren't gifted. So, I think this idea of natural talent is not entirely fallacious. Like there are, I think, abilities that vary among us depending on our DNA. Some of us are born tall, some of us, like me are born very short and I don’t have all the required elements for being a basketball player. So, there are abilities, that differ in part because of our genes but I think the most important thing to understand is that it's a dangerous idea to get obsessed with that as an explanation for why people are great because hidden, I think are thousands of hours of really effortful practice and dedication.

Michael Siegel: So, it's a matter of what you do with that natural talent, right? It’s a matter of how you develop it.

Dr. Angela Duckworth: I would say, as a mom I've got two still teenage girls. One of them is going to age out of her teenage years in a year but I would say that as a mother, I try not to term my conversations with my own children about where I think their gifts are, what genes they seem to have inherited. It's not very useful. I was a biology major by training so I'm not saying that there aren't any biological and genetic differences but is it a useful conversation to talk about that? And one of my affections for philosophy is that if you look in the writings

of William James, right. At the turn of the 20th century, and to paraphrase William James, is that, in his experience, there were so many people who were as he put it half awake, right? Because they were nowhere near the ceiling of their potential. And so, to constantly talk about limits and potential because of this seemingly finite genetic heritage or another seems like a misplaced kind of conversation.

Michael Siegel: So, let's dig deeper into gritty people. They have four things in common in your research, interest, practice, purpose, and hope. How do they develop these things? And how can we develop these things?

Dr. Angela Duckworth: The earlier stage of the development of someone who ends up in adulthood being really dedicated to something with real grit is interest. And interest in people tend to emerge with some kind of difference anyway around adolescence. And it's not to say that five-year olds aren't interested in things in fact it's hard to imagine anything that a five- year old’s not interested in, but the kind of like, I'm interested in this more than I'm interested in that ends up happening around the time we hit puberty. And that might be because that's also the developmental stage where we start to carve out our eventual adult roles in society. So, interest is very important. And if you ask me what would be true of somebody in adulthood? It's that they haven't lost that childlike interest. For me, the first thing I did when I woke up after I went to the bathroom and drank some water and then

got the coffee going, was I took out some psychological research articles that I was saving for today. And man, I just couldn't wait to dig in, right? I'm so interested in psychology, so that's the first stage. Then the second stage developmentally is typically having a routine of practice. So, really dedicating

yourself to something in a way that makes you better and better. And there's a whole science of practice. The third element is even later in life and that often happens in adulthood or even middle adulthood, so not something that your typical 20-year-old manifests and that is purpose, kind of beyond the self-orientation, toward things that are beneficial to other people than you. And then I mentioned hope, I think that's my poetic way of talking about resilience, as Marty Seligman might put it, or Carol Dweck at Stanford has done pioneering work on growth mindset. And these ideas all have in common the idea of urgency. So, I think that at every life stage, no matter how old you are, you're going to encounter situations that really threaten your sense of urgency. And I think the idea that you can focus on what you can change, even if you're not ignoring the many things you can't change, ends up being elemental to this long- term commitment toward goals and an effort towards them as well.

Michael Siegel: I want to go back to the idea of practice. And you talk about the concept of deliberate practice. What does that look like?

Dr. Angela Duckworth: It was this summer, actually, that the world lost Anders Ericsson, who was the scientist behind the idea of deliberate practice and his somewhat untimely death and certainly a shock to the scientific community is an occasion to really honor what his contribution was. So, Anders, we all joked with him was the world expert on world experts, because that's

what he did. He studied, maestros in music, he studied prima ballerinas, he studied award winning mathematicians and what he found is that these world class experts have in common a routine where they focus on a specific element to improve. And often Andres would talk about this as being usually a weakness so something where relatively speaking- I mean, if you're Usain Bolt, you're already pretty great. But maybe your stats in 100, meter dash are relative to other things like weaker for you. So, you drill on that and then some element of that which I can't even make up because I'm not a sprinter. And then you really have a mental image of what it means to actually do that thing better. And then you try with 100% of your effort and your attention and actually deliberate practice, Anders found to be, in his research, exhausting and most of the world class performers he studied, could not do more than four or five hours, even at the peak of their careers per day. And then what's really important and I think a lesson for all of us, because as I say these things, I mean, you're not Usain Bolt but you can say like, "Oh, could I identify some relative weakness in myself some element of what I do, be a better listener, ask better questions, keep a better calendar or make better eye contact, whatever it is can I drill on that? Can I really try with 100% focus, to make this mental image of what it would be like if I could do it, make it happen?" The key thing is, the last step is to get feedback and then reflect on that feedback and repeat. And I don't know that there are many people in the

world who are able to take feedback without being defensive but I think the key is that you have to get over it. But then say, "Hmm, I'm not only going to rate myself in my head about like how I did, but also how I took the feedback. And I'm going to get myself a 10 out of 10 for taking the feedback openly and that would be one way to like reframe feedback as itself, like a challenge to take.

Michael Siegel: Yeah, ties into a concept from our last speaker of radical inquiry, to really be honest about yourself and to hear the feedback and do something about it. For me, it would be my backhand in tennis. But that's—

Dr. Angela Duckworth: Are you defensive about it? Michael Siegel: Very.

Dr. Angela Duckworth: Do you get over it?

Michael Siegel: I get over it, I get over it. The next one I want to focus a little bit more on is purpose. And purpose is, as you said, it's outward looking, does this come with maturity?

Dr. Angela Duckworth: I do think that a kind of outward looking, what is my life all about, orientation does typically come for many of us actually in middle to late adulthood. And actually, Ericsson, the great psychologist suggested that there are different stages of life but towards the end of life that we would enter what he called the generativity stage. And that was a feeling of trying to give back, like when people ask, what will my legacy be? Or what is the meaning of my work? You know, that's often the kind of question that somebody is in that stage might ask. I think whatever age you are, you can ask yourself, do I feel like my work actually makes somebody else's life better? And my guess is that if you can say yes, then you feel filled with purpose. If you doubt that, then maybe there's some

adjustments that are in order.

Michael Siegel: You mentioned earlier, Carol Dweck, because you connect the idea of hope to a growth mindset. Would you elaborate on that a little bit?

Dr. Angela Duckworth: Yeah, I'll try to be a poor substitute for Carol Dweck. She's like literally my hero. If a magic fairy said like, “Would you trade your life for half of Carol Dweck life?” I would say, “Yeah, totally. That's a good deal.” So, Carol Dweck, studies the beliefs and she calls them mindsets. The beliefs that we carry around ourselves, they're like little theories that we have about the way the world works, human nature and how they influence our motivation and our behavior. And in particular, Carol's discovered in her scientific research that our beliefs about intelligence are really important that so many of us believe that intelligence is fixed and that you can't change it. And the opposite of that would be a growth mindset, really believing that abilities are malleable. And I have done a little bit of research as part of a team with Carol and I find that grit and growth mindset are very reliably correlated. So, if you walk around and you think like, oh, people can change, I can change, whatever my abilities are today I can get smarter. That it tends to be characteristic of gritty individuals.

Michael Siegel: Our probation chiefs came up with the vision that people can change, and we can make a difference so I would say that's part of that.

Dr. Angela Duckworth: We all have a kind of fixed mindset and growth mindset voice in our head, it's not that you're either one or the other. I was a school teacher, I taught math in high school and middle school. And at the end of a long day, when you're really frustrated with a

particular class or particular student, it is easy to retreat into, “Well, I guess they just don't have the ability to change. I can’t do anything about it. And we all have that voice and to not feel like there's anything wrong with you but if you could amplify and listen harder for the voice that says, maybe this kid can change, maybe there is something they haven't yet tried, that they haven't yet tried. And when I think of the best teachers, the ones that I really hold up as like wow, you are like basically the Usain Bolt of AP economics teachers. They all have that, they're relentlessly optimistic about what their charges, whether it be students or athletes or whoever you're in charge of, what they'll be in the future.

Michael Siegel: So, speaking of the voices in our head, your book describes we have two voices, the inner pessimistic fixed voice, and the inner optimistic growth voice, if you will, which could send mixed messages. And the question is, how can our court leaders be sure that they are projecting a growth mindset?

Dr. Angela Duckworth: I’ll just betray my underlying motivation for joining you in this conversation. Well, one is I knew it would be a really fun one and it has been and the other is that I think the work that you are collectively doing is so important. And so, what you can do, I think, first and foremost, is think of yourself as being on a stage. It was Shakespeare who said that all the world's a stage and each of us are players, but some of us are really in the spotlight. And I think when you're in that position of authority, everybody is watching you.

And what you do becomes a model for everything else. I remember going to watch the Seattle Seahawks, I'm friends with and I'm a big fan of Pete Carroll, who's the coach there. And it was interesting to follow him around for a day because the interviews are one thing, but if I could tell you how much respect he was able to communicate when we went to the lunchroom and he grabbed his tray and he gave me mine first of course, and he treated every single person there, like the person serving him his chicken sandwich and like literally, the security guard, Russell Wilson, like everybody the same. And this modeling, I think it's the most important thing that a court leader could do if you want the people to have a growth mindset model growth mindset—

Michael Siegel: Is grit contagious?

Dr. Angela Duckworth: I don't know, but much of human behavior is. So, I haven't studied contagion and grit. But I will just say that there's a lot of research on contagion and other things. And I'll just say two things. One is emotions are contagious. So, the work of a scientist like Sigal Barsade at Wharton shows that for example, the mood that you show up to work with ends up being contagious, just like bad things are contagious, good and bad moods can also be contagious. And you could think about that a little bit next time you show up for a zoom call, that that emotion- it's okay to have negative emotions. I think we should be honest about our feelings. But you could also think like if I can help myself by coming in a

better mood that might have ripple effects. And the other thing that's contagious is behavior. And this is especially relevant to the kind of work that your listeners are involved in because human beings are mimics not just for emotion but for any behavior. So, when people litter and other people see them litter then they litter. It's like you see two people throw their soda cans into the street

and before you know it, you're not waiting to find the next trashcan either. And I think this is why we need to hold up as examples. When you are a court leader, for example, you want to hold up, you want to create a social norm by like telling stories about like the three people that you recently encountered, who had done X, Y, or Z that you really admire, because people will mimic that. And so, you can kind of maybe tilt their attention towards the parts of society or the examples that we want other people to mimic.

Michael Siegel: So, you had a really fascinating experience when you interviewed with McKinsey, and you've showed some grit in doing that, is there a way interviewers can identify grit in people they're interviewing?

Dr. Angela Duckworth: I think it's pretty hard to identify in a short interview what someone's going to do over the long term. I think you can interview people and immediately tell whether they have charisma, or whether they have a particular way with words. I don't know that you can have a sense of, after a really hard week, will this person come back on Monday morning ready to go? In 10 years, will this person still in some way have the same North star? It's hard to know, in a 45-minute interview. I do think you can look maybe at their history. If somebody is the kind of person who tends to throw themselves into things for multiple years, like they played a sport for multiple years, they made some kind of progress, or if they've done community service. It wasn't just one thing and then another thing, but

there's some continuity. Like I see this person has been doing volunteer work for multiple years, they've progressed, there's a deepening of their expertise, I think I would put more stock in a careful review of what they've actually done in their lives than how they perform in a short interview. In that interview, of course, you can ask them questions about what they've done but I think asking them just sort of like, how do you think about failure? I personally have not had any success, researching ways to ask the magical interview question that gets at somebody's grit.

Michael Siegel: That's helpful, thanks. You mentioned- we talked about contagion and certainly we're in a period of a pandemic, again a different kind of contagion. And how can grit help us get through this period or can it?

Dr. Angela Duckworth: With grit and the pandemic, I would just first say, this pandemic is terrible. And I don't know anybody, anybody who would say that 2020 isn't their most stressful, difficult year for all kinds of personal and also some general reasons. So, I think that what I would say specifically about grit is that I think what helps a lot of us get through hard times is feeling like we are doing something that is useful. And I think for us to hold on to that. So, if you're a teacher it's like doubly hard this year, but holy smokes, you have such a useful vocation. And if you are a court leader or if you are some other part of the judicial system or if you are a mom or a dad. I think that is in a way, so much more helpful than

anything else that we can do, like the ultimate balm to wounds is to feel like you are useful to other people. And I've been trying to hold on to that. And it's not that I don't grind my teeth. I didn't sleep very well, last night, I'm very stressed, a little crankier but I think, I'm a professor, I have 80 students

in my class on Wednesday and I know that if I work really hard this week, I could be useful to them when I show up and do the best job I can in bringing them through another week.

Michael Siegel: Great. That's a great framework to use. Can we overdose on grit and lose the balance that we need in our lives?

Dr. Angela Duckworth: I am a big fan of David Chang, this star chef, he just wrote this memoir called Eat a Peach and I am halfway through it. And it's a very candid memoir. And I'm just at the part where he talks about how now that he has some perspective on his life, he realizes that work has been his addiction, that it was a way of him coping with unhappiness and he's very candid like coping with depression. I think there is a danger in the kind of single-minded obsession, that is sometimes how grit is described and how it might have negative impacts not only on you, but like your children, your spouse, the suffering, people who work for you. So, I think we should think about character more broadly than grit. Aristotle and also Martin Luther King and also Maria Montessori and many other great thinkers that their characters is the aim of developing into the kind of person who is good for other people. And so, if you think about character, it can't just be grit, it has to be empathy and it has to be curiosity. And it has to be patience, it has to be honesty. And anyway, if we think about Grit in perspective then it certainly can be dangerous if thought of as the only thing that you need to lead a good life.

Michael Siegel: Do you have anything else you want to tell our audience?

Dr. Angela Duckworth: You know one thing that surprised me about interviewing paragons of grit, I just mentioned David Chang, there is nobody who's grittier than David Chang. And he describes himself as, when he was a young chef that he had like the least talent of anybody in his cooking school class. Like his cooking partner, threatened to quit if she had to keep cooking with him because he was so bad. And he said, but I did it like through grit. One of the things I would say that surprised me when you interview people like David Chang, is that they're not invincible and they're not perfect people. They struggle, as David Chang writes about with mental health problems, they have like all sorts of challenges and imperfection, things that you wouldn't see on a YouTube highlight reel. And I guess my message for the people who are listening is if you feel like a deeply flawed, super imperfect, awkward, clumsy person, then you're just like the people I study. And what's so remarkable to me is that people are able to take all of their imperfection and all of their humanity and to do something with their life nevertheless. And to me, it was a revelation because I too thought these people were just like, perfect. I mean, you watch a documentary on Netflix and you think like oh, okay, wow. But really, these people are no less human than you or me. And I think that gives me hope that with the material we have, that we can do something useful with our

lives.

Michael Siegel: That's so inspirational. Thank you so much, Angela.

Dr. Angela Duckworth: Thank you Michael. I so enjoyed it and I hope we get to talk again. Michael Siegel: I do as well.

Lori: Thanks, Michael and thanks to those who are listening. A reminder that Angela Duckworth’s book is Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance. If you'd like to hear more episodes visit the executive education page on FJC.dcn and click or tap on podcast. In Session is produced by Shelly Easter and directed and edited by Craig Bowden. Our program coordinator is Anna Glouchkova. Special thanks to Chris Murray. Thanks for listening, until next time.