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True Grit: Focusing Forward During a Recession

Whether you are leading an organization that is weathering the recession or someone out of work looking for a new job, grit is "an essential (and often overlooked) component of success," according to Jonah Lehrer in the Boston Globe (August 2, 2009). By grit, he means staying focused on a goal and working hard at it, not getting distracted or overwhelmed by obstacles. If you are looking for work during this recession, grit is a necessity. For one thing, everyone gets negative messages from the media, from friends and relatives - everywhere you turn. It can feel overwhelming. See Alex's evocative description of the kind of "true grit" it takes for a job search below.

"Grit involves focusing on the future."

It not easy being a manager now, either. You are being asked to do more and more with less and less. Every decision is scrutinized and criticized by both the people above you and the people below you. You are being second-guessed at every turn. This is doubled in spades if you are a

hiring manager. No wonder people are doing a lot of "clone hiring" - hiring someone with exactly the same profile as the person who left the job. You are less likely to be criticized.

Grit involves focusing on the future. Angela Duckworth is a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania who studies the phenomenon of grit. Lehrer quotes her as asserting, "Grit is very much about the big picture. It's about picking a specific goal off in the distant future and not swerving from it."

We would like to add something about obstacles. It's not enough to just clench your teeth and power through them. Yes, you do need to stay focused on your goals and keep working toward them persistently. But when you meet problems on the way, stop and analyze what you can do to get around them. Holly's job quest is the perfect example. ■

Destination Success

On September 25th, Priscilla will be a speaker on the panel on Talent Management and Leading Change at Destination Success, a day-long program of the Center for Women and Enterprise. The event is being held at Bentley College and goes from 8AM to 3PM.

See <http://cweonline.org> for more information. ■

Guest Story

True Grit – from the perspective of a job searcher

By Alex Donald

True grit is more than just the ability to persist in the face of challenge. It is also the ability to change direction, to use the knowledge gained from persistence. Sometimes it takes true grit to admit that something hasn't worked or won't work. This is just as hard in a career as in the other domains of life. We are all told that we should learn from failure. But failure hurts, so naturally we try to forget it. We renew our efforts, we soldier on, we tweak the knobs and dials of our resumes, interview technique, management style. But what if that doesn't work?

In high school I dreamed of becoming a physicist. For over a year, I tried to do something I really couldn't do. Finally, I was able to tell myself that it was time for a change. I dropped physics and majored in comparative literature. I already knew French, and I had always had an interest in books and literature.

Continued: see over, first column

Success Story

For confidentiality, names and some facts have been changed.

Holly's Story

She didn't go to the "right" college. She wasn't a math genius; she was a history major. She didn't have excellent grades. But Holly knew she wanted to be a financial analyst. The summer after her junior year in college, Holly worked at a small investment firm in Seattle doing some basic industry research on prospective clients.

"It just clicked for me. They gave me more and more sophisticated work to do, and I just ate it up. They were surprised at what I could do, but I was even more surprised." When she got back to college, she changed her coursework to include finance courses, but she didn't get anywhere with the college recruiters with financial analyst positions when she graduated. "I just wasn't the right profile. So, I looked for another way in, and found an internship position in a bank."

Continued: see over, second column

Guest Story *(continued)*

Suddenly I was following my natural bent, swimming with the current instead of against it. I still sometimes wonder if there was a way I could have hacked physics. But I know that I gave it everything I had, so I don't really have regrets.

The stubborn will to keep going is a key part of persistence, but we also have to be open to new information. True grit requires that we face the truth about ourselves and the world. If after you persist and persist and persist, the world is still telling you to stop or change direction, that's worth listening to, as long as you have truly made every effort. So is the voice inside that says, "this isn't me, this doesn't fit." Grit is important, but without truth it just grinds. Sometimes, true grit tells us to stop trying to chip or bash our way through walls, and walk around them.

Alex is an accomplished editor, writer, and publication project manager who is looking for a position in the Boston area. You can reach him at alexandre.donald@gmail.com ■

Holly's Story *(continued)*

Eighteen months of hard work later, Holly had proved herself a star employee with a knack for presenting complex financial data. "Even VPs came to me for help putting data on understandable slides. I took every course I could and pretty much apprenticed myself to a market research guy to learn as much as I could."

Holly moved back with her parents to afford an MBA. "I knew this time I had to have good grades, so I quit my job after a semester's worth of credits, and concentrated on school."

As luck would have it, Holly found her first "real" financial analyst job at a boutique investment banking firm during the summer of 2008. Her timing wasn't the best. As the firm slowly imploded last winter, Holly remained the person everyone counted on. "Everyone was hanging around complaining, but I thought, I don't care. This is my chance to show what I can do, whether the firm survives or not."

That turns out to have been a good strategy. Her reputation with her colleagues is what enabled her to find her new job. "It's a better job. It's a better firm. And, guess what? It's in New York City!" ■

**Check out Priscilla's new blog, *The Career Optimist*,
<http://thecareeroptimist.blogspot.com>**

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