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# CAREER DEVELOPMENT

## The Secret Ingredient—GRIT!

By Jamie Shallow

*“I lost the fight, thus I am a terrible athlete, thus I failed at the only thing I care about in life, thus I should die.”<sup>1</sup>*

That’s some pretty interesting logic, isn’t it? This was a statement from an article online about how Ronda Rousey felt when she lost her first UFC fight. How many actuaries feel this way after failing an exam—or at least the first one they fail? For people who are driven, and successful early on, that first big loss feels pretty painful—even when it’s not the kind that requires stitches and a trip to the hospital.

I wonder what Rousey will do if she loses the next fight ... and the next one ... and the next one? What do actuaries do when they fail exam after exam? How many failures does it take before we quit? How many failures does it take before we *should* quit? What is logical? What about other areas of life?

On the one hand, it is good to be persistent; on the other, it’s not so good to be foolishly persistent. It reminds me of some of the contestants on *American Idol*—you know, the ones who perform very confidently in front of the judges but sing way off-key. Then, as they are walking out of the building they are hurling insults at the judges’ lack of judgment because their mother told them they sing great!

Maybe, when it comes to a career path, there is a point where people should be honest with themselves and the data and adjust their path accordingly. When it comes to life in general, however, there may actually be a place for being foolishly persistent.

We’re all familiar with the paradigm of seeing the glass half full or half empty, right? But, don’t we also know folks who have a glass that by objective observation would be about 90 percent full, and yet like Ronda Rousey after her loss, they’re unhappy and depressed? Then we also know others whose glass is only about 10 percent full and they are like those *American Idol* contestants who seem oblivious to reality and walk around like everything is great!



Maybe happiness is somewhat like Santa Claus—seeing is not believing, but rather believing is seeing. We may have to use less of our left brain sometimes to find happiness, and find it in the 10 percent that is full in our lives, if we happen to be in that leftmost tail of life’s distribution curve.

We all fall somewhere on the continuum between a glass pretty empty and a glass pretty full. Many things we do not choose, and where we lie also varies throughout our lives. To become successful in life and as a leader, many will need to traverse through the hills and valleys and find a way to persist with vision, purpose and happiness. There are a couple of valuable traits that tend to develop in those who follow this path—grit and compassion.

### THE SECRET INGREDIENT—GRIT

In 1991 a young quarterback was selected with the 33rd pick in the NFL draft by the Atlanta Falcons. He was designated as the third string quarterback on the roster, behind Chris Miller and Billy Joe Tolliver. His 1991 stats read 0 completions out of 4 attempts, with two interceptions.<sup>2</sup> Who knew he would become a three-time MVP, and arguably one of the best quarterbacks of all time? Not Jerry Glanville, that’s for sure! It took Ron Wolf and Mike Holmgren to recognize what was in Brett Favre and then nurture it to excellence.

Just what was in Favre? Well, I had the privilege to learn the two key traits to Favre’s success when I heard him speak at a “Get

Motivated” seminar a number of years ago. He told the crowd that the secret to his great success was that he was coachable, and had a passion to win. Makes me wonder how many people fail to reach their potential and remain third-stringers in life because they never found someone to believe in them.

Now, there’s definitely a lesson in being coachable, but let’s focus here on the passion to win. I think this really translates into grit. When you think back to Favre’s career, he definitely exemplified grit! Just think of his almost 300 consecutive starts—that’s phenomenal for an NFL quarterback. I would conjecture that he was likely just born with some of this grit, but I also bet that some of it came from walking through valleys in life and developing the ability to push on with hope.

Winston Churchill is quoted as saying, “Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.” I would call this grit. One of my favorite examples of this is in the story of Abraham Lincoln’s life. In the chapter titled “Never Give Up,” the book *Pushing Up People* illustrates how Lincoln grew up poor and is said to have suffered a number of failures in life:<sup>3</sup>

- 1831 Failed in business.
- 1832 Defeated for legislature.
- 1833 Second failure in business.
- 1836 Suffered nervous breakdown.
- 1840 Defeated for elector.
- 1843 Defeated for Congress.
- 1848 Defeated for Congress.
- 1855 Defeated for Senate.
- 1858 Defeated for vice president.
- 1858 Defeated for Senate.
- 1860 ELECTED PRESIDENT.

I know that some of this is disputed, but I’m sure there are a good number of people who have walked this planet who have had even worse track records in life before finally reaching that moment of fulfillment. So, maybe if you’re struggling with life’s challenges, you’re really being prepared for something great—don’t lose hope! Take it from Rocky Balboa:

Let me tell you something you already know. The world ain’t all sunshine and rainbows. It’s a very mean and nasty place and, I don’t care how tough you are, it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. You, me or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain’t about how hard you hit. It’s about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward. How much you can take and keep moving forward. That’s how winning is done!<sup>4</sup>

#### POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH!

So grit keeps us moving forward when things get challenging, but in what state do we move forward? In reading Shawn

Achor’s book, *The Happiness Advantage*, he discusses three possible states—the state you currently are in, one further negative, and the path up, which results in you being stronger and more capable than before getting knocked down. This third path has been referred to as “Post-Traumatic Growth.”<sup>5</sup>

We’ve all heard that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger (I can just hear Kelly Clarkson). That’s Post-Traumatic Growth! However, for some, it’s more like what doesn’t kill you right away still slowly kills you bit by bit over time. What makes the difference?

It turns out that the event is not even so much about what happens to us, but about our perception of the event. In Achor’s book, he refers to an experiment where people are questioned about a hypothetical situation: There are 50 people in a bank. A robber walks in and fires one shot, and you are hit in the right arm. Some see the situation as negative, and some see the situation as positive; but in both cases the views come from comparing the event to a “counterfact” that each person invents, which is also completely hypothetical.<sup>6</sup>

Someone might have answered it was an unfortunate event by comparing it to the counterfact of not being shot at all. Someone else might have thought it was a fortunate event by comparing it the counterfact of 50 rounds being fired and multiple people being shot. The interesting take-away is that the counterfact is hypothetical, and that means we have the power to choose it and consequently have the power to see the event as positive as opposed to negative.

In the end, I guess it actually is true ... **seeing is not believing, but rather believing is seeing!** ■



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#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Peyser, E. (2016), Feb. 16. “Ronda Rousey Opens up About Suicidal Thoughts on The Ellen DeGeneres Show.” Retrieved from <http://www.nymag.com>.
- <sup>2</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/atl/1991.htm>.
- <sup>3</sup> Williams, A. (1985). *Pushing Up People*, p. 165. Doraville: Parklake Publishers.
- <sup>4</sup> Rocky Balboa Quotes. (2006). Retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0479143/quotes>.
- <sup>5</sup> Achor, S. (2010). *The Happiness Advantage*, p. 109. New York: Crown Publishing Group.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.