

Chapter 4

Pursuing Accomplishment Through Character Development



Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- 4.1 Explain the roles of character vs. intelligence/talent relative to success.
- 4.2 Explain how the seven key character strengths affect the ability to achieve and accomplish goals.
- 4.3 Describe strategies used to increase self-motivation.
- 4.4 Identify eight effective strategies for using time wisely.
- 4.5 Explain how dividing your tasks into quadrants can lead to effective use of time.
- 4.6 Understand the causes of procrastination and methods for overcoming the habit.
- 4.7 Recall tips for improving academic effectiveness.

One vital aspect of optimal human functioning is being able to accomplish your goals – achieving success whether in your job, your academic pursuits, or in your personal life. We begin this chapter by asking this question: “What leads to success?” According to Paul Tough (2012) in his thought provoking book *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character*, for the better part of the

20th century, both psychology and education were barking up the wrong tree in their mission to help individuals acquire the tools for achievement, particularly when it came to either academic or occupational success. The single-minded focus was on training academic and cognitive skills in efforts to boost IQ and achievement levels so individuals could succeed in life. This was based on the *cognitive hypothesis* which held that success in life was based on IQ and talent, both of which are largely fixed early in life. Now we are not in any way saying that education or helping individuals improve academic or cognitive skills is useless. Nor do we deny the effects of environmental factors such as lack of opportunity due to poverty, discrimination or racism. Rather, our message is that when it comes to the factors which lead to success, other things besides cognitive skills might play an even more important role.

4.1 What Leads to Success?

Explain the roles of character vs. intelligence/talent relative to success

Consider these facts. When you compare the IQs of high school dropouts with the IQs of people who graduated from high school and also with those who got their GEDs, it turns out that those who passed the GED are just as smart (in terms of IQ and achievement) as high school graduates and significantly smarter than high school dropouts. Therefore, you could assume that they are just as prepared to succeed as the high school graduates in terms of important future outcomes such as maintaining employment, finishing college, divorce rates, tendencies toward substance abuse, and so forth. As it turns out, when you look at the statistics for such future outcomes, the GED holders do no better than the high school dropouts despite the fact that as a group they are considerably smarter and have much better academic skills (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001). Should we conclude from this that getting a GED is a waste of time? Obviously, the answer is no. What we need to look at is the psychological traits that enabled those who graduated from high school, whatever their IQ or achievement level, to make it through school. Traits such as the ability to persist at a boring task, to plan, to think ahead, to follow through, and to wait for your rewards (which psychologists call *deferring gratification*) turn out to be invaluable in college, in the workplace and for life in general. These are non-cognitive skills which, believe it or not, contribute far more to success than the intellectual skills we often make the focus of our efforts whether in terms of self-improvement or in helping others to succeed (Tough, 2012).

Consider another fact. The U.S. ranks 8th in the world in college enrollment rate, a respectable rank. But in terms of college completion, that percentage of students who go on to finish their degrees, the U.S. is second to last! We used to lead the world in producing college graduates and now we are the leaders in churning out college dropouts (Tough, 2012). If you consider that the value of a college degree is now at its peak in terms of impact on later income (a typical American college graduate can expect to earn almost twice as much over the course of a

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lifetime than a typical high school graduate), it makes this dropout rate even more puzzling. Why is this happening? We used to think that this was the result of poor academic preparation or a greater influx of low IQ students into higher education, a variation on the cognitive hypothesis. However, it turns out that whether a student graduates from college doesn't have as much to do with how smart he or she is. It has to do with certain character traits that involve self-control, motivation, perseverance and time management skills which predict who will succeed in college, in the workplace, and in life overall. Bearing this in mind, there are invaluable lessons from the realm of Positive Psychology that can assist you in developing those skills and attitudes which are necessary to function successfully.

4.1.1 Positive Psychology and the Study of Character

Recall that Martin Seligman, a founder of positive psychology, advises that the primary topic for positive psychology is the study of well-being and the primary goal of positive psychology is to help you achieve optimal human functioning, which he refers to as flourishing. In review recall that, according to Seligman, flourishing is composed of five elements summarized under the acronym *PERMA* which includes:

- P** Positive Emotions – a wide range of emotions from contentment to bliss
- E** Engagement – being totally absorbed in an endeavor
- R** Relationships – having positive, healthy relationships with significant others
- M** Meaning – having a sense of meaning and purpose in your life, which often involves belonging to or serving something bigger than the self
- A** Accomplishment – your ability to achieve your goals

For you to fully flourish, it would be helpful to have high levels of all five elements of PERMA operating in your life. However, most people typically place unequal emphasis on each of these aspects and may even ignore one or more. Is it possible to flourish without an emphasis on all five? According to positive psychologists, the answer is yes. Indeed, many people may make up for a lack of good relationships with an emphasis on accomplishment, or compensate for a lack of accomplishment with an emphasis on good relationships, or a strong sense of meaning or purpose. Nevertheless, if you are employed in a demanding job or occupation, or involved as a student in an academic environment, it is very difficult to flourish without developing the motivation and skills for accomplishment (the A in PERMA). To this end, this chapter explores lessons and applications derived from positive psychology geared toward enabling you to accomplish the goals on your personal path towards flourishing.

It turns out that character is vitally important to flourishing. As explained in Chapter 3, during the second half of the twentieth century the field of psychology virtually abandoned the direct study of character due to the bias that science

should only describe rather than recommend certain behaviors. In addition, character was viewed as too tied to morality, therefore non-scientific and unworthy of study. Positive psychology reversed this long-standing trend. We will emphasize what positive psychology offers regarding the study of character reflected in our strengths and virtues, and how that relates to accomplishment. Specifically, how can each of us motivate ourselves towards achievement? Then how can we follow through to do what is necessary to make that a reality?

Questions

1. Success is primarily a function of _____.
 - A. intelligence
 - B. luck
 - C. being born into the right family
 - D. character

2. _____ is an important aspect of flourishing as summarized by PERMA.
 - A. Wealth
 - B. Cognitive ability
 - C. Accomplishment
 - D. Religion

3. Positive Psychology resurrected the study of _____ in psychology.
 - A. character
 - B. talents
 - C. epigenetics
 - D. genetics

4.2 The Seven Key Character Strengths for Accomplishment

Explain how the seven key character strengths affect the ability to achieve and accomplish goals.

In this chapter we will be using the terms accomplishment and achievement interchangeably. In our culture there is a tendency to confuse accomplishment with talent, with high IQ, or athletic ability, or artistic or musical gifts. Talent is helpful

for success, but not necessary. Skill is essential for success, but skill can be developed without talent. Beyond sheer intelligence and talent, character plays a major role. If one is long on smarts or talent, but short on signature strengths denoting character, then accomplishment is much harder to realize or sustain. Most people know someone gifted with high intelligence or great talent who squandered it because of a lack of character. The study of character and signature strengths provides a roadmap for enhancing your ability to achieve and accomplish your goals.

In the early years of psychology there was an emphasis on character; however, in the twentieth century this changed to a focus on the environmental variables which shape behavior. This emphasis on the environmental causes of low accomplishment tended to either ignore or minimize the role of individual responsibility or choice in lack of achievement. Psychology was centered on pathology and weakness and tended to attribute poor achievement only to external factors such as parenting or poverty. On the other hand, accomplished individuals from all walks of life were given personal credit for their achievements rather than ascribing their success solely to the effects of a fortunate environment. The end result of this was a paradigm where individuals were products of and driven primarily by the effects of their past. Positive psychology takes a different view on this, emphasizing that individuals can also be driven by hopes for their futures. This is not to deny that people are sometimes victims of very difficult or traumatic circumstances and deserve our help in any way possible. But often, people are responsible for their own actions, and their poor choices can stem from their character, or lack thereof. Positive psychology advocates improving difficult circumstances along with shaping character which entails enhancing strengths and ameliorating weaknesses.

While all signature strengths are important in their own regard, there are particular character strengths which are associated with accomplishment (Tough, 2012). The conclusions from a wealth of studies in positive psychology identify seven key signature strengths which are essential to achievement, with each contributing in a different way. These seven include:

Self-control

Perseverance/Grit

Emotional Intelligence/EQ

Zest/passion/energy

Gratitude

Optimism

Curiosity

4.2.1 Motivation and Volition

Before we embark upon a discussion of each of these seven key strengths, it is important to point out that the mechanics of achievement fall into two separate dimensions, that of **motivation** (the desire for a goal) and **volition** (the ability to

do what is necessary to achieve the goal). Each of these is necessary to achieve long term goals but neither is sufficient alone. For a common example, you might be very motivated to lose weight, but unless you have the volition, the self-control and willpower to monitor your eating and activity levels, your motivation alone will not get you very far. In fact, high motivation with lack of volition just produces frustration. On the other hand, if you have lots of volition but no desire to work toward a goal, you will be stymied by lack of direction. Consider the example of an individual who works as a housekeeper and has become an expert in cleaning and organizing. However, her own house is a mess because by the time she arrives home her motivation to clean has disappeared despite her high skill level. Therefore, to maximize accomplishment both motivation and volition must be addressed. Referring back to the seven key strengths, several relate directly to motivation for accomplishment. Zest, curiosity, optimism and gratitude and some aspects of EQ or Emotional Intelligence (EQ will be covered in detail in Chapter 9) enable us to create and enhance our motivations. However, volition requires self-control, perseverance and aspects of EQ and zest/energy. Chapter 2 focused intensively on optimism. Chapter 8 will introduce you to the visualization techniques which can be powerful tools for enhancing motivation and helping you achieve your goals. This chapter will emphasize methods for improving volition with a focus on self-control and perseverance.

4.2.2 Self-Control and Accomplishment

Many positive psychologists have come to the conclusion that to become effective, especially when accomplishment is involved, **self-control** is perhaps the most important signature strength to cultivate. Why? Self-control, to a great extent, involves the ability to **defer gratification**, to wait for your rewards. You may wonder why this is so important. Just so you don't underestimate the profound impact of being able to defer gratification, consider the results of this landmark study. Researchers Walter Mischel and Phillip K. Peake (1990) offered four year olds at a preschool at Stanford University a simple choice. They could receive and eat one marshmallow at the start of class, or they could get two marshmallows if they waited until the end of class. A long term follow-up study of these same children later after high school graduation revealed that those who opted to wait for two marshmallows were far more successful and effective in their lives, in general, than those who had grabbed for one marshmallow now. The implications of these results were discussed at length by positive psychologist, Daniel Goleman, in his landmark 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence*, where he stated:

The emotional and social difference between the grab-the-marshmallow preschoolers and their gratification delaying peers was dramatic. Those who had resisted temptation at four were now, as adolescents, more socially competent, personally effective, self-assertive and better able to cope with the frustrations of life. They were less likely to go to pieces, freeze or regress under stress, or become rattled and disorganized when

pressured; they embraced challenges and pursued them instead of giving up even in the face of difficulties; they were self-reliant and confident, trustworthy and dependable; and they took initiative and plunged into projects. And, more than a decade later, they were still able to delay gratification in pursuit of their goals (p. 81).

Thus, one of the key building blocks of effectiveness is the ability to use self-control to wait for your rewards, to delay gratification. Various studies of self-control, such as the marshmallow research, underscore the importance of this for academic and job success. For example, there have been numerous studies demonstrating that individuals measuring high in self-control were more successful, especially with college academic achievement (Tangney and Baumeister, 2000). The bottom line is that to receive future rewards you often need to undertake present discomfort. The authors of this text wonder whether the proliferation of technology has undermined our ability to defer gratification, due to the fact that we are becoming more accustomed to instant rewards at the touch of a keystroke or a swipe of our cell phones.

4.2.3 Perseverance: The Role of Effort in Achievement

In order to put in sustained effort you often have to defer gratification, especially if the task is one involving long term as opposed to quick, short-term rewards, such as writing a term paper. But you also have to be able to persevere, especially if the going gets rough. Putting in sustained effort is vital for accomplishment, whether in your job, your academic pursuits, or even in the quality of your interpersonal relationships. Consider the following equation which represents the invaluable role of character in accomplishment.

$$\text{Achievement} = \text{Skill} \times \text{Effort}$$

Assuming that opportunities for accomplishment are kept constant, achievement can be represented as the multiplicative product of skill (defined as intelligence, talent and/or competence) and effort. Therefore, a high level of effort can compensate for a low level of skill and vice versa, but if either is zero then achievement will be nil. Thus, no matter how skilled you are in any area, if you put in no effort you will accomplish nothing. If your skill level is high, greater effort will reap even greater rewards. This applies whether we are talking about academics, sports, your job, the arts, playing computer games or chess, or any area where you care to achieve. Sustained effort, it turns out, is all about character.

One aspect of effort for accomplishment involves your willingness to practice. *Never underestimate the value of practice in achievement.* For example, if we are talking about highly accomplished individuals, there is a wealth of evidence that high level expertise is not a function of genius, but rather flows from the amount of time and energy spent in deliberate practice (Ericsson & Ward, 2007). The fact of the matter is that most geniuses throughout history worked extraordinarily hard

(Dweck, 1999). In many cases genius is more made than born. Famous geniuses such as Einstein, Darwin, and Tolstoy were not considered to be exceptional children. Even musical geniuses, while obviously gifted with talent, typically put in thousands of hours of practice while they were very young. For example, Mozart is well known for having composed symphonies as a child, but his early works were not noteworthy or particularly original, as compared to his later compositions which were an outgrowth of all of his hard work. Scientists who research creativity have developed the *ten year rule*, that is, no truly great creative contributions come without at least a decade of intense effort. Along these same lines, Malcolm Gladwell (2008) in his fascinating book, *Outliers*, insists that in order to achieve true mastery in a discipline, one has to put in *about 10,000 hours of practice*. According to Gladwell, it takes the brain that long to assimilate all that it needs to learn in order to achieve true mastery, whatever your level of talent.

If we refer back to the research on neuroplasticity, this makes perfect sense. Your brain evolves and changes depending on how you habitually use it. Individuals who practice regularly really do change their brains in the long run! Therefore, if you want to achieve world class status, whether you are playing a musical instrument, training for the Olympics or any sport, playing chess, writing, or anything else, you have to put in your 10,000 hours which often ends up taking about 10 years (the ten year rule). Think about it: have you ever known anyone who was really good and really successful at something (job, hobby, sport, relationship) who did not put in extensive time and effort? This takes perseverance.

Ultimately, to maximize your ability to achieve you have to utilize self-discipline, exercise self-control, and persevere. This is where putting in your 10,000 hours is vital if you want to achieve mastery. This applies whether in your job, playing the violin, or perfecting your jump shot. It takes perseverance and self-control to put in those 10,000 hours. That's why positive psychologists consider these traits to be, by far, the most important of all when considering accomplishment. If you already possess these signature strengths then you are poised to achieve. However, if self-discipline and self-control are not your strengths, consider implementing the specific exercises at the end of Chapter 3 to further develop these areas.

4.2.4 The Power of Grit: Passion + Perseverance

If you have a very high level of self-discipline, characterized by both high persistence and an extraordinary passion to complete a goal, you may display what is referred to as **GRIT**. This is the marriage between the signature strengths of passion/zest and perseverance. Self-discipline underlies achievement, but grittiness often underlies extraordinary accomplishment. This level of exceptional achievement is rare. Grit is a "never-give-up" form of self-discipline where very high effort is the byproduct of the signature strength of extreme persistence. It follows that the more grit you display, the greater your effort (i.e. the time and energy spent on a task), and all that effort multiplies your progress towards your goal.

To determine your personal level of grit, fill out the following inventory developed by positive psychologist Angela Duckworth (2009), a protégé of Seligman and the guru of grit.

The Grit Scale

Respond to the following statements using the following scale.

1 = not like me at all 2 = not much like me 3 = Somewhat like me
4 = Mostly like me 5 = Very much like me

1. ___ New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from old ones.
2. ___ Setbacks do not discourage me.
3. ___ I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.
4. ___ I am a hard worker.
5. ___ I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.
6. ___ I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.
7. ___ I finish whatever I begin.
8. ___ I am diligent.

SCORE ___

- Scoring: 1. Add your score on statements 2, 4, 7 and 8.
 2. Add items 1, 3, 5 and 6 and subtract that total from 24.
 3. Add the two steps together and divide by 8.

Low Grit: Below 3.03 for males; below 3.13 for females

Medium Grit: Between 3.04 and 3.74 for males; between 3.26 and 3.78 for females

High Grit: Above 3.75 for males; above 3.79 for females

Superior Grit: Above 4.21 for males; above 4.25 for females

Duckworth (2007) demonstrated through research that grit is not related to IQ. Her research further indicated that students with high grit scores but low SAT scores achieved high GPAs. Grit turned out to be a major factor in who survived until the final rounds at the National Spelling Bee. Furthermore, although the military has their own complex evaluation system to determine who has the right stuff to survive the demands of West Point, it turns out that the Grit Scale is a better predictor of which cadets made it through the grueling basic training than the military's own system. The bottom line is this: You may not have control over how much natural ability you bring to a task, but how much effort you put in is always up to you. Making the choice to put in maximal effort involves persistence and self-control. If you expend really extraordinary effort, you can even achieve grittiness.

4.2.5 Overcoming Blocks to Accomplishment

As individuals we all have our own idiosyncratic ways of putting roadblocks in our paths towards achievement, some of us more than others. For some of us the blocks relate to motivation; for others the obstacles relate to volition. It is impossible, within the confines of this textbook or this course, to review every conceivable block to effectiveness when it comes to accomplishment. But by addressing four general areas, we are likely to hit upon themes or difficulties that are relevant for each of you. In general, when it comes to accomplishment the most common ways to make it harder for yourself involve:

1. Low motivation
2. Failure to use your time wisely (i.e. poor time management skills)
3. Failure to prioritize
4. Procrastination

What follows are tips, techniques, reframes and frameworks to help you overcome such stumbling blocks on your personal road to accomplishment.

Questions

1. The most important signature strength for accomplishment is _____.

- A. gratitude
- B. curiosity
- C. bravery
- D. self-control

2. Achievement = _____ × _____

- A. Luck; Effort
- B. Skill; Effort
- C. IQ; EQ
- D. Optimism; Curiosity

3. The mechanics of achievement involve both _____ and _____, both of which are necessary but neither of which is sufficient.

- A. talent; skill
- B. motivation; volition
- C. high IQ; motivation
- D. grit; sweat equity

4.3 How to Enhance Self-Motivation: The Role of Visualization

Describe strategies used to increase self-motivation.

To work on the first obstacle to achievement, that of low motivation, skip ahead to the lessons in Chapter 8 on visualization and goal setting. Practice those visualization techniques and apply them to your goals. Experience how this can facilitate your motivation. However, there is yet another strategy which can be applied to enhance both motivation and volition utilizing a combination of visualization and cognitive strategies developed by NYU psychologist Gabriele Oettingen and colleagues (2012, 2014). This method is called *Mental Contrasting with Implementation Intentions* or *MCII*. Oettingen discovered that people tend to use three strategies for goal setting and two of these often don't work very well for helping people to accomplish their goals. The first strategy, which she calls "indulging," involves vividly imagining the future outcome you would like to achieve and all the good things that can accompany it, akin to the kind of visualization promulgated by *The Secret*. While indulging is fun, it often does not lead to actual achievement because it is typically disconnected from the effort component. The second strategy is "dwelling," where individuals focus almost exclusively on all of the obstacles that could potentially get in the way of accomplishing their goals. Needless to say, this does not work very well either as people just get discouraged and give up.

The third strategy involving mental contrasting uses both indulging and dwelling together in strategic combination, once sufficient motivation exists. This is similar to the defensive pessimism strategy discussed previously in Chapter 2. MCII involves visualizing a positive outcome while simultaneously concentrating on potential obstacles in the path (for example, you could visualize getting high grades this semester in all of your classes while simultaneously acknowledging that your tendency to procrastinate and prioritize TV-watching and Facebook could jeopardize achieving this goal). Oettingen advises that MCII be used primarily when high motivation or expectation of success exists, as it facilitates increased commitment toward your goals and energy to complete goal-directed behaviors. The next step is to create a series of implementation intentions which are specific plans in the form of *if/then statements* that link obstacles with ways to overcome them. For example, if the desired outcome is an A on a test, then make a statement to yourself such as "If I am distracted by TV after school, then I will wait to watch my programs until after I finish studying for my exam." Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of this MCII method in a variety of situations, such as improving academic performance (Gollwitzer, Oettingen & colleagues, 2011), assisting high school students to practice more diligently for the SAT (Duckworth, Oettingen & colleagues, 2011), helping dieters eat healthier foods (Adriaanse & colleagues, 2010; Johannessen, Oettingen & colleagues, 2012), prompting more