



BUILDING TENACITY IN THE FACE OF UNCERTAINTY

By Dr Monique Beedles.

Over the more than three decades since I started as a pharmacy student, it seems uncertainty about the future has been one of the few constants in our profession. The past three years have exacerbated this as our lives and livelihoods have been under increasing pressure.

Survival is our most powerful human instinct. People don't take much convincing to work for their own survival. When survival is at stake, nothing else matters. People can do extraordinary things in these situations. When Ernest Shackleton set off for Antarctica in 1914 it was billed as a grand adventure. In the days before GPS or modern thermal clothing, such an adventure carried considerable, life-threatening risks.

When I was at Harvard Business School, we examined the case of Shackleton with Professor Nancy Koehn, author and business historian. She shared that when the explorers' ship was lost in the ice floes, Shackleton and his entire crew survived for 18 months stranded in the freezing Antarctic wilderness. They devoted their time and effort to the routine daily tasks of staying alive: cooking, keeping warm and marking the passing of time. There was nothing more important than these tasks.

When survival isn't at stake, motivating people towards a common goal is difficult. Not because the goal is too

big, but because it's not big enough. In a quote often attributed, perhaps erroneously, to Russian playwright Anton Chekhov, it's said that 'any idiot can face a crisis, but it's the day-to-day living that wears you out'.

Belief in a higher purpose

Tenacity, then, requires purpose. To keep going in the face of inevitable challenges requires that we have a reason to get out of bed in the morning. If our survival isn't at stake, what is our driver?

To persist in the long term in the face of challenges requires a belief that there's a higher purpose we're working towards, one that benefits others besides ourselves. Dr Angela Duckworth, bestselling author of *Grit*, studied 16,000 American adults and found a clear relationship between 'purpose' and 'grit'. The most tenacious people were those who believed that 'my work makes the world a better place'.

This sense of purpose extends beyond the transactional nature of a job – being a necessity to fulfil the basic needs of life – and even beyond a career, where one job may be seen as a stepping-stone to another. Instead, those with high levels of purpose and grit see their work as a calling. No single type of job fulfils the criteria of a calling. Rather, it's your own perspective that defines your purpose and how your work contributes to that purpose.

Grit begets grit

Are gritty people more successful, or are successful people more gritty? Dr Duckworth's view is that it's most likely both. Her work has included studying the relationship between commitment to extracurricular activities in one's youth and success later in life. She writes that 'following through on our commitments while we grow up both requires grit and, at the same time, builds it'.

This is similar to building strength through weight training. While it takes strength to lift weights, the more you do it, the stronger you'll get.

Tenacity is one of the important capabilities all leaders need to persevere in the face of prolonged uncertainty and constant change. When your role involves managing risks, for yourselves and for others, and when you're responsible for the performance and wellbeing of your team, tenacity keeps you hanging in there.

What are you doing to build your grit muscle?



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