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Do you have the GRIT to go the distance?

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GRIT & MINDSET

Implications for women lawyers

Just as motivation, self-discipline and optimism can be nurtured, experts believe grit and mindset can be learned and developed

By Milana Hogan and Katherine Larkin-Wong

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This article resulted from the panel discussion *Dust Yourself Off and Keep on Going: Improving Your Grit & Mindset to Overcome the Challenges that Women Face in the Practice of Law* at NAWL's 2013 Annual Conference. The panel was based on Milana Hogan's research into two traits, grit and mindset, and their correlation with women's success in the law. Katherine Larkin-Wong discussed the implications of grit and mindset as a young associate and how you might view your career path – and incidents that occur in the life of every young associate – differently depending on your grit and mindset scores. Charmaine Slack also spoke on the panel and discussed how she saw grit and mindset applying to legal practice from a partner's perspective.

The response to the panel prompted the current Chairwoman of the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession, Bobbi Liebenberg, to make the "GRIT Project" the Commission's signature project for this year. Among other things, the GRIT Project will produce two "programs in a box." The first will provide training on grit and mindset for attorneys and will be designed so that firms, bar associations and other attorney organizations can teach their lawyers about the power of true grit and a growth mindset. The second will provide the same tools for a law school and law student audience.

This article offers an overview of the results of Hogan's research and a preview of the types of issues that the GRIT Project will be addressing this year. To read Hogan's full dissertation, go to: http://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=15541534&trk=nav_responsive_tab_profile (LinkedIn Premium account required).

IN THE PAST TWO DECADES, men and women have entered law firms as first year associates in roughly equal numbers. As of 2012, about 45 percent of incoming associates were female (*Report of the Seventh Annual NAWL National Survey on Retention and Promotion of Women in Law Firms*, 2012). There is, however, a gradual erosion of women that increases with seniority, and by the time women arrive at the most senior leadership levels – of counsel, nonequity and equity partners – they represent only 35 percent, 26 percent, and 15 percent, respectively (NAWL, 2012). These somewhat grim numbers have remained static for close to 30 years so it is clear that the significant number of women entering the profession – although there is some



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Hogan and Larkin-Wong, along with Carrie Hightman, are co-chairs of the ABA Commission on Women in the Profession's GRIT Project.

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Hogan's research focused on factors that don't involve luck

evidence that this number is on the decline – has not translated into staying power and equal advancement (NAWL, 2012).

Such stark and seemingly dismal statistics have led to a number of studies attempting to identify the obstacles and barriers that have led to this year-over-year failure to reduce the gender gap at the leadership level. While such studies represent important work, relatively little is known about the shared characteristics and competencies of the women who do manage to succeed in the law firm environment. What do these women leaders have in common, and what, if anything, can we learn from their journeys?

If you ask women at the top to describe factors that contributed most to their success, you're likely to hear a variety of answers, including finding the right mentor or sponsor, inheriting the right clients and taking advantage of opportunities to develop new business. But what about the factors that do not depend – at least in some small way – on good luck? What about the factors that one

Grittier individuals tend to work harder and longer than their peers and are more likely to engage in deliberate efforts to improve their performance.

has complete control over and can alter, or not, at an individual level? It is this latter set of traits that Hogan's research seeks to address. Specifically, her study considers how noncognitive traits like grit and a growth mindset impact female success in BigLaw.

Defining grit

Grit is defined as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth, 2007, p. 1087). Angela Duckworth, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, has developed a 12-item self-report grit test (bit.ly/1alTt8Z) that measures grittiness on a scale

of 1 to 5. Using this and other measures, grit is shown to predict achievement, often above and beyond other metrics – such as GPA or rank of law school – that many law firm recruiting departments often look to first.

Among other things, the research on grit has shown that: 1) grittier individuals tend to work harder and longer than their peers and are more likely to engage in deliberate efforts to improve their performance, 2) grittier individuals are more likely to “stay the course” and not get distracted by immediate, short-term interests or needs and 3) having grit is particularly important in very challenging contexts.

What is mindset?

Carole Dweck, a psychologist at Stanford (Calif.) University, suggests that people generally have one of two mindsets – either a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. People with a fixed mindset believe their strengths are predetermined. They believe they have a certain amount of intelligence and talent and these gifts are immutable. In

contrast, people with a growth mindset see their abilities as flexible entities that can be developed through dedication and effort. They understand that no one has ever reached expert levels of performance – not Mozart, Einstein nor Tiger Woods – without years of practice and hard work, and many setbacks along the way. Research has shown that individuals with a growth

mindset tend to outperform those with a fixed mindset, and are also far less likely to get frustrated when things become challenging. Dweck argues that your mindset is a powerful tool that profoundly affects the way you lead your life and can determine whether you commit to, and accomplish, the things you set out to do.

Grit, Mindset and BigLaw

Given that almost all lawyers are expected to achieve at very high levels and to work long, sometimes grueling hours in a very challenging environment, it stands to reason that having grit and a growth mindset can help

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you to achieve success. Indeed, grit (or a synonym of grit) is often on the short list of answers successful women lawyers give when asked to describe the traits or behaviors that led to their success. While there is strong anecdotal evidence to support the power of these two traits, Hogan wanted to take things a step further by trying to answer the following questions: What is the nature of the relationship between grit and success, and mindset and success, for women lawyers currently practicing in BigLaw? Are successful women lawyers more likely than less successful women lawyers to have grit and growth mindsets? If so, how important are these traits and how much do they tell us about a lawyer's future prospects? Are grit and mindset more or less important to success when we account for other

important factors (i.e. whether or not a woman has children, her law school GPA, etc.)? Are grit and a growth mindset outcomes of – or precursors to – success?

Research methodology

To answer these questions, Hogan undertook a two-part, mixed methods study. The first part of the study consisted of a confidential, online survey that was sent to a random sampling of lawyers from firms in the AmLaw 200. In

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There is a statistically significant relationship between grit and success for women in BigLaw

total, the survey was completed by 477 women (a 25 percent response rate). Of those women, 35 percent were partners, and 65 percent were nonpartners, including counsel, specialists and associates at all levels of seniority. The survey asked roughly 60 questions, and included the administration of the grit test and the mindset scale. The survey also included questions that were designed to ascertain various measures of success, including the

Grit is a precursor to BigLaw success rather than an outcome of it.

message that the respondents had received at their last performance review and whether or not they were on partnership track.

The second part of the study was a series of phone interviews with women who had completed the survey. Interviewees were chosen based on their grit and mindset scores, and where they fell on the success spectrum, in order to make sure that the sample was

representative of as many different perspectives and outcomes as possible (i.e., women with high and low grit and mindset scores and high and low measures of success). Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes.

Once all of the data had been collected, Hogan built a series of models that looked at the impact of grit and mindset on different measures of success in order to ascertain what happens to the strength of these relationships when we account for other factors that have also been known to contribute to success.

Findings

The results showed a very strong, statistically significant relationship between grit and success for women in BigLaw. Specifically, the results showed that grit is related to several success measures including: the most recent message participants received at their performance reviews (e.g., “your performance was outstanding or your performance was average or below average”), and most significantly to the number of hours a lawyer works and her own perception of the quality of work she receives (e.g., “I get the best and most interesting work” or “I get

Average grit score for women in BigLaw:

3.94 (equates to ~ 80th percentile)

Average grit score for all women = 3.43

Women also have the edge when it comes to self-discipline

Decile	Men (N= 4,169)	Women (N = 6,972)
1	2.5	2.5
5	3.38	3.5
6	3.54	3.63
7	3.75	3.79
Women Lawyers	n/a	3.94
8	3.92	4
9	4.21	4.25
10	5	5
Mean (Standard Deviation)	3.37 (0.66)	3.43 (0.68)

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simple, routine work”). Furthermore, the data suggested that grit is a precursor to BigLaw success rather than an outcome of it. Finally, Hogan found that many successful female lawyers display growth mindset characteristics, and rely heavily on them to navigate challenging situations in the workplace (including their responses to negative feedback from senior lawyers, self-doubts, and the – sometimes overwhelming – pace and volume of the work itself).

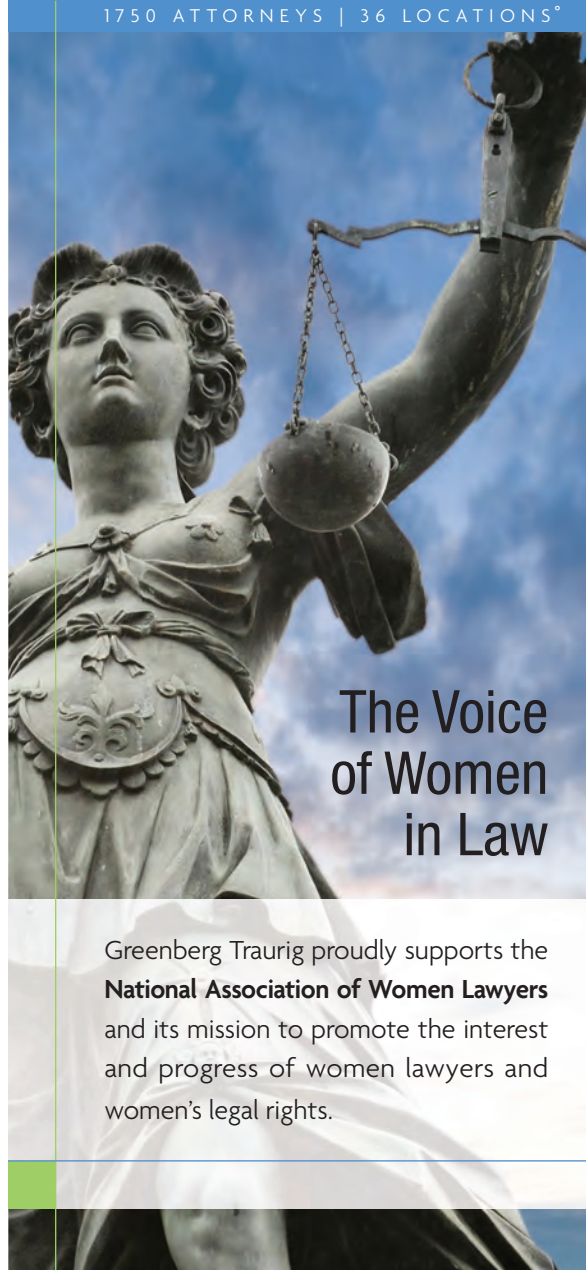
How firms can use grit and mindset in professional development and recruiting

The very best news about grit and mindset is that most experts believe they can be learned and developed given the right conditions (this is based on the fact that similar traits such as motivation, self-discipline and optimism are traits that can be nurtured and strengthened). Following are some preliminary ideas for ways firms may reinforce and strengthen grit and growth mindsets in their lawyers. Look for these ideas to be expanded and refined through the GRIT Project.

1. Learn how to handle and learn from failure

Most successful people have failed repeatedly. Just ask Oprah Winfrey, J. K. Rowling, Venus Williams, Ruth Bader Ginsburg or any number of wildly successful athletes, business leaders, actors or women lawyers and they will all tell you about times when they struggled and weren’t sure they had what it takes to be successful. We need to teach lawyers how to deal with the negative emotions that go hand-in-hand with the inevitable setbacks, losses and failures that are a part of practicing law.

In general, most lawyers are not good at failing, because they are so used to succeeding, and it feels really foreign when things don’t work out the way they had planned. Stop for a second to think about the success one needs just to get into law school. Legal practice is often one of the first times that associates



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Long-term goals and a positive outlook go hand in hand

face serious and recurring challenges to their work product. (In re-reading our draft, we realized that this framework suggests something about our own “grit.” We define these moments not as “failures” but as challenges. Challenges are something one overcomes. Failure is an end. Challenge is just the beginning. This is one example of grit and a growth mindset.)

We can teach lawyers appropriate coping strategies such as distancing oneself from the loss, understanding the limits of what you can and cannot control, and even deep breathing and journaling to process negative emotions (this last suggestion may be a little “out there” for most law firms!). Understanding how to learn from failure goes hand in hand with grittiness and a growth mindset.

2. Learn how to receive criticism

Closely related to learning how to deal with failure is learning to receive criticism. This is key, because it allows

We can teach lawyers appropriate coping strategies such as distancing oneself from the loss, understanding the limits of what you can and cannot control, and even deep breathing and journaling to process negative emotions.

us to learn quickly without popping the enthusiasm bubble. Lawyers, at all stages of their careers, need to know how to digest constructive feedback and criticism, and how to act on the messages they are being given in order to improve their performance. Associates need to be able to take criticism from senior lawyers and focus on how to address it; partners need to be able to learn from a client about why they lost that particular pitch and bounce back from it. Gritty individuals who have growth mindsets are much more likely to respond well

when receiving this kind of advice, but even those who don't start out that way can develop these skills over time. “Fake it 'til you make it” is one way of developing your skills for internalizing and addressing criticism. It may very well be that, after a lot of practice believing that you can do something that feels impossible, eventually you will actually develop a growth mindset.

3. Praise efforts, not outcomes

As Dweck points out, you don't want to inadvertently send the wrong message about the importance of grit or growth mindset by overlooking these traits in the evaluation processes. Your evaluations shouldn't focus on only results. Instead, praise effort in addition to ability. Insert a category that evaluates lawyers on how persistent they are, or the extent to which they persevere in spite of challenging obstacles. Often, firms are afraid to do this, but we don't think it's really that risky. Biglaw

is largely populated with extremely smart overachievers. It's OK not to be so focused on results, at least early on in a lawyer's career while she is still building critical skills. It is far better for the firm to encourage effort and continuing to work on developing those lawyer skills because it will increase the likelihood of both the individual lawyer's success and the creation of more well-rounded lawyers at the firm. The alternative:

that lawyers, especially young lawyers, avoid tasks at which they believe they will not be successful, encourages lopsided development.

4. Be realistically optimistic

Recent research by Martin Seligman and colleagues has shown a link between optimism, grit and mindset. It makes sense. It's hard to set long-term goals and persevere, and to have a growth mindset, without having a positive outlook. We should make every effort to

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positively reinforce our lawyers, and to pursue programs that help them stay optimistic about their careers, even (and especially) when there is room for improvement.

5. *Identify what you are passionate about*

Grit is as much about passion as it is about perseverance. We should encourage lawyers to identify what they love to do and then pursue it with zeal. Too often, lawyers don't take the time to think about their passions because they are so focused on their immediate to-do lists. If you don't know what makes you happy, it's hard to pursue it, and if you're not passionate about what you're pursuing you won't be able to achieve the same levels of success.

6. *Specialize*

People who are highly successful tend to over-focus in one area. Sometimes that's OK. Don't worry so much about having the perfect balance when it comes to work. We cannot excel in every area. There is simply not enough

It's OK not to be so focused on results, at least early on in a lawyer's career while she is still building critical skills.



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Don't worry so much about having the perfect balance when it comes to work

time in the day to be good at everything and to develop the necessary skills that will set you apart – so we should think about encouraging our lawyers to be the best that they can be at the things that they love. They are much more likely to stick around if they love their jobs and will be grateful that we've allowed them to make a career out of doing what they like most. Notably, we are not the only ones pushing this message. Sheryl Sandburg talks about the trade-offs women need to make for success in their careers in her blockbuster book *Lean In*. Larkin-Wong has also written about how these tenets apply to young lawyers (See Grover Cleveland and Katie Larkin-Wong, *10 Things Every New Lawyer Should Do – Right Now*, *The Careerist*, (Oct. 29, 2013) bit.ly/1m2Qw27.)

7. Don't assume that you can't do it

We should be reminding lawyers of this regularly, either through the review process or in meetings with professional development team members or career counselors. If a lawyer is hitting a wall, and having trouble getting past it, she should not be so quick to assume that it's because she lacks a certain ability or innate talent – it could just be that she doesn't have a particular skill set, but that doesn't mean she can't *develop* it. By way of example, when Hogan was training for the marathon, and she ran her first 20-mile training run, she

doubting herself. When she got home (after successfully running the 20 miles), she was feeling pretty defeated, and then her husband pointed out that she shouldn't feel discouraged because her training plan called for only 20 miles that day, not 26. Just because she couldn't run 26 miles on that particular day did not mean that she wouldn't be able to do it on race day. Training for something, learning about something, working towards something is a process. There are many little milestones along the way, and lawyers should try to focus on those, and not just on the endpoint. The feeling that you need to be perfect from Moment No. 1 is caustic both for individual lawyers and for firms. We should all strive for perfection and there is no doubt that mistakes in law can have serious consequences. However, we will make mistakes. The question is how we deal with them and that is something we should probably talk about more.

8. Try on a growth mindset

Another running story will help explain this one. A few years ago, Hogan was having trouble running hills. She read that if you force yourself to smile when running up a hill, it can actually make you feel better. She thought it seemed a little crazy, until she tried it: "Something about plastering on a fake smile while running up a mountain of a hill just struck me as hilarious, and then I really did start smiling and eventually even laughing. It was still painful – don't get me wrong – but at least it was enough of a distraction to make the experience more enjoyable." Her experience is not unique: Science shows that often a physical action alone, such as smiling, or giving someone a hug or breaking into dance, can prompt feelings of happiness or love and affection, even if those feelings did not lead to the action in the first place. So, we should create the kind of environment where lawyers can practice having a growth mindset, and act like they would if they did have one, even if they don't really buy it yet: "Fake it 'til you make it." Notably, while most lawyers are largely outside of the average on the grit scale, their mindset scores are much closer to the average. This fact suggests

Introducing the idea that there are different mindsets which can significantly impact or detract from future success can have a huge impact on students and employees.

really started to panic at mile 19. She kept thinking, "If I am having this much trouble running 20 miles, how am I ever going to finish 26 miles?" Like many women who have attempted something that was not easy (e.g. the road to partnership) it was a really bad moment. She was

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that developing a growth mindset may have the greatest impact on success for law firms and individual lawyers.

9. Educate

This may seem obvious, but we need to educate our lawyers about these traits and other traits that lead to success. Too many people simply do not know enough about them to make use of them. Science shows that, when it comes to mindset, simply introducing the idea that there are different mindsets which can significantly impact or detract from future success can have a huge impact on students and employees. For example, in one study, Dweck and colleagues introduced the idea of the brain as a muscle to junior high math students (in a 30-minute session) and those students went on to significantly outperform a control group of students

who were not introduced to this concept. This, by the way, is the fundamental belief behind the GRIT Project. We hope that by creating easy-to-use programs in a box that we will encourage law firms, bar associations, law schools and other organizations to begin teaching grit and mindset to the legal profession.

Grit and mindset are powerful and potentially critical traits, and if we want our lawyers – both men and women – to be successful practitioners, we need to make sure that they know as much about them as early in their careers as possible. ■

If you are interested in learning more about the GRIT Project, contact Katie Larkin-Wong at katherine.larkin-wong@lw.com or Milana Hogan at hoganm@sullcrom.com.

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