

### 3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

Lynn Thoman

(<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

#### Ep 52: The Secret to Outstanding Achievement with Character Lab Founder and CEO Angela Duckworth

**INTRO male voice:** Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

**Lynn Thoman:** Hi everyone, it's Lynn Thoman, welcome to another episode. Today, I'm excited to be here with Angela Duckworth. She's a Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, and she studies the character traits and habits which predict success. She has studied West Point cadets, National Spelling Bee finalists, teachers, sales people and students. At every place, she asked who is successful and why. In all these different contexts, a few characteristics emerged as significant predictors of success, and intelligence was not the most important characteristic. I'm excited to find out what these character traits are and how we can nurture them. Welcome, Angela, and thanks so much for our conversation today.

**Angela Duckworth:** Thank you so much. I am really looking forward to it, Lynn.

**LT:** I am as well. It is a pleasure. What got you first interested in thinking about what it takes to succeed?

**AD:** I think at some point, everybody asks themselves this question, "What is it going to take for me to succeed, to do something with my life that's meaningful? To achieve my dreams." I was no different from anyone else, I was ambitious like everyone else, growing up as a little girl, I think I had an extra dose of interest because my dad in particular was really interested in achievement and high achievement, really at the highest level, so Nobel Prizes and the Olympics and Pulitzer Prizes, and any time there was something where it could be said that the person was the very best in the world at what they did, my dad was fascinated.

**AD:** When I was growing up, though, it was pretty clear to me that I wasn't the most talented person. I didn't think I was dramatically deficient in any particular area, but I didn't ever come home from school thinking, "Well, I'm the smartest kid in school, or I'm the most athletic kid in gym class or the most musical person." So the question then for me was, "What do I do with this ambition? How low of a ceiling is there on what I might achieve in life?" I do think actually that talent and intelligence have an important role to play, which we can unpack, because I don't think it's a simple sort of like, "Oh, it doesn't matter," but I would say that when it comes to the achievement of personally meaningful goals that are really hard to accomplish over the long term, talent doesn't always predict sticking with that dream, and also I think we can ignore the importance of passion and perseverance over that long stretch. And that's what I call grit. As a psychologist, I study, I don't know, everything that's not talent, I guess, that factors into what you do with your life.

**LT:** So, you were a management consultant at McKinsey and you left to start teaching seventh

grade math. What did you learn from teaching math?

**AD:** I was a management consultant for such a brief time that I hardly feel justified in saying that, but I will say that the contrast, the day I left McKinsey and the shiny glass skyscraper where you could order in sushi on the client's dime at will, and then going to the Lower East Side in New York City and teaching in the public schools, actually the Lower East Side before it became all chic, but was still pretty shabby in terms of the scruffiness in the neighborhood, it was a pretty stark contrast. I think what my students taught me were a few things, and one is that young people are so smart, they really are, and I'm not saying that they came in knowing how to do algebra and they left knowing how to do calculus, but they're just so smart, they're really quick, and so that struck me. I was like, "Oh, yeah, I'm amazed at what the young mind can do."

**AD:** The second thing I realized was that those bright young minds don't always actually turn in their homework or study for their tests or even master the material that I was teaching them in math class. As well as I could teach, I was quite convinced that my students were falling short of their potential. So really what this contrast, leaving McKinsey, going to hang out with these young people who are so smart but not always achieving what I knew they could achieve, I think that made me want to understand better human motivation. How can we take this amazing capacity we have to learn new things and to get better at things and actually tap it? Because I didn't do a great job as a teacher of I think unleashing that potential in my students. I did the best job I could, and they did wonderful, but I knew there was the gap.

**LT:** And what did you see as the differences between your best and your worst students?

**AD:** At the beginning of year, a rookie teacher, I was like, "Oh, it's so easy for me to see on day two or three of the school year, the students who are very fluent in mathematics, and you show them a concept and they're like, 'Oh, got it.'" [chuckle] And then other students, "What? I don't understand. Explain it again." In the first week, I guess I knew who my As are going to be, I guess I know who the students are going to be who are going to succeed with flying colors when summer rolls around nine months from now, and I was surprised that in many cases, the students for whom math was really much more of a struggle ended up doing very well in a very deep way. It's not just they tested well, but that they really learned a lot during that year.

**AD:** And some of my brightest students, not all, but some of them were real disappointments to me in that they didn't actually learn as much as I thought they would. And when I think of intelligence, my strong intuition about intelligence, is there's something about the rate at which you can acquire a certain domain of knowledge, so if you're really talented at math, then that just means that the rate at which to improve is really high compared to somebody who's less talented. But the rate at which something comes to you is not necessarily a guarantee that the time that you put in is going to be matched by that, so some of our fastest learners and our most gifted students, I think, as any teacher would say, they're not always the ones who work the longest or the hardest, and who are the most resilient when failures or step-backs, as they always do, get in the way.

**LT:** You went from teaching at schools to getting your graduate degree in psychology and studying success, and the places you went to study success are so interesting. Can you tell us some more about how and where you studied success?

**AD:** A lot of research in psychology is, you give people a questionnaire and then you give people

another questionnaire, and then you see what the correlation is between one questionnaire and the other. I wanted to study achievement and what predicts achievement, so I didn't want to give a questionnaire that said, "So how successful were you?" Because I really wanted a more objective measure, and therefore I went to places where you could objectively measure achievement, not because these are the only places or that that kind of achievement is the only thing that mattered, but I wanted objectivity in the scientific research. So, I went to West Point, which is the nation's oldest military academy. I wanted to see whether I could predict dropping out versus staying in West Point during especially the most difficult parts of training, as well as graduating four years later from when you enter West Point.

**AD:** I went to the National Spelling Bee and looked at those 250... They're kids really, they're aged 7 to 14 years old, the finalists in the National Spelling Bee, and I asked the question, "Can we predict who's going to win or the final ranking?" I've looked at performance in sales, again, not measured by, "Hey, Lynn, how do you think you did?" But actually, in the raw performance metrics from dollars of commission, etcetera, and I've looked at other objective indicators, "Did you graduate from college? Yes or no." And I think in my work, again, it's not because I think achievement is the only thing that matters in human life or the most important thing, but I think it is one of the things that all of us, every little girl and boy is born with some ambition to do something with their time on the planet, and if you do want to study achievement, I think it's best studied without relying entirely on self-report questionnaires.

**LT:** You are one of the few to take an evidence-based approach to studying success and achievement. And what did you find? What qualities does it take to succeed in all these different environments?

**AD:** One thing I found, and I think has been confirmed by other scientists who study this in similar ways, is that when you look at measures of effort for my research, and a lot of times I'm looking at people's grit, their, in this case, self-reported passion and perseverance for long-term goals, and you look at how that predicts long-term achievement, but you also look to see how it's measured up against or how it correlates with talent. Here's what I find, that measures of effort like grit are not very correlated with measures of talent. In other words, if I know about Lynn, that she's really gifted and talented at something, I'm not going to be very good at predicting how much time Lynn will put in to her practice and how long she'll stick with it. You might have thought, at least I did when I started doing research, that really talented people should be the hardest-working and the most resilient because, gosh, every hour they put in, they get so much out of, why aren't they the ones who are there early to practice, last to leave.

**AD:** So, talent and measures of effort like grit are pretty independent. That's one big takeaway, and I think that it helps parents and coaches and leaders, and really all of us understand that your potential or how quickly things come to you is one thing, and what you do with it, how much you apply that and make use of it, is quite another. And the second major discovery is that these measures of effort, including grit, really do make a difference, and so it's not just a talent game, it's not just that we need to measure early aptitude, but there is something important. I think the more challenging the goal, the more meaningful the goal is personally, the longer it takes to achieve.

**AD:** If we're talking about graduating from college, which takes between four and six years in the United States, or earning your PhD or building a company, or for the many people who in the last year have become especially interested in social justice issues and so forth. These are not goals that

submit to one all-nighter or even to sprints of a lot of effort, it's really a long game, and I think there especially effort really matters enormously.

**LT:** So interesting, I just finished a conversation with William Green, who has interviewed all of the legendary investors around the world. He spent hours interviewing all of these people, and he doesn't use the word grit, but he's essentially saying the same thing about them. They all take these simple rules and simple principles, and apply them rigorously with the same approach. They're simply increasing the odds in their favor in investing and in life, and approaching investing as well as life as a marathon, not a sprint. But he uses exactly the same understanding of what makes these investors so successful, that it really is their grit, their perseverance.

**AD:** I think that it was Thomas Keller, the three-star Michelin chef, really, the legendary Thomas Keller, he said, "The secret to being a great chef is not necessarily anything more or less than this abiding commitment to the mundanity of excellence." Right? Applying, technically trying to get a little bit better, trying to get that dish a little bit better day in, day out, and I think that consistency and that stamina and the long game, if you just think about how true that must be, that sounds like investing, that sounds like becoming a chef, that sounds like doing great work in the community, that sounds like music, that sounds like art, that sounds like science. And again, I don't want to claim that grit's the only thing, but it just assumes part of the nature of the challenges themselves that we're talking about that calls upon this, call it what you will, really, tenacity or determination, sustained obsession, but it's just hard to see another way around the failures or the setbacks, the long plateaus, the years of concerted effort that need to be invested.

**LT:** When you have tested grit in schools, what do you find?

**AD:** I have tested grit in schools, and I want to say something about kids in particular, because when we talk about West Point, these are young adults, Spelling Bees competitors are kids, but they are very unusual kids who typically are doing something that they've done for, frankly, much longer than you would think possible given that they're only nine, but oh, my gosh, they've been in Spelling Bees for years already. So, I think when you're talking about most kids, I'll say that when we've looked at grit, we do find that it predicts things like doing well at the school, but I will also just hasten to add that... And I add this also as a mother of two teenage girls, that developmentally, it's not appropriate or even necessarily a good thing when kids are very narrow in their interest.

**AD:** Now, and when we talk about Thomas Keller or a world class investor, when they're in their 40s or something, of course they should be specialists, of course everything that they see and hear and experience comes back to their work, and they see it everywhere, and there is a really important need for specialization to become a true expert, but I think when you're seven, nine, even eighteen and nineteen, which are the ages of my two daughters, you're at a different phase of life. And so, grit, maybe what you're aspiring to in terms of your tenacity, your work ethic, your resilience in the face of setbacks, but I think the journey of grit is also about developing a passion.

**AD:** And in the younger years, that looks like sampling, not specialization, in other words, getting really excited about track and then doing it for a year and then realizing, "I don't really like team competitive sports as much as I thought," or, "I think I want to play the trombone," and then doing that for a year and then maybe realizing that you like it more than you thought, and doing it for another year. But the message for parents especially, I think, has to be that if you would hope that your young daughter or son grows up to be gritty, then you have to let them quit things.

**AD:** And, in fact, I think often students, children need a little encouragement. My own daughter, Lucy, started playing the viola when she was in elementary school. And in our family, we had a rule that everyone had to do something that was hard, we call it the "hard thing rule," and I instituted it with my husband because we thought they needed to learn some grit. But we always told them, "You can always quit things at the end of the season or the end of the semester." Now, Lucy, after a few years of doing viola, was so reluctant to quit because she felt like it would be wasting all the efforts she put in.

**AD:** And also, even when she was in middle school, thought she was too old to do certain things, which is ridiculous, like try something new. I have to say, I pushed really hard for her to quit, and that's ironic a bit, because I'm the grit lady. But the reason why I did that is that it was so clear to me that she didn't really truly, intrinsically enjoy it. She loved her teacher and she loved being able to get better at something, but she had no interest in music. She didn't listen to it much, certainly not classical music, she... No interest in going to concerts, didn't want to read about any famous violists, didn't get all the joy that I think eventually we need to find in our work to be sustained.

**AD:** So just, I want to say that, yes, grit predicts the things that you would expect in childhood and adolescence, but I think developmentally it's much more important as parents that we encourage our children to sample widely and to learn about the world and to learn about and develop themselves and their interests.

**LT:** What are the dos and don'ts of building grit and perseverance at different ages and stages of people's lives?

**AD:** I think one of the big dos is to be an intentional role model. I think, by now, most parents and mentors, there's so much overlap between everything I say about being a parent and being a manager, a director, or a CEO, an executive director. So, you can think of yourself in this role because all of us are playing some role like that for a younger person. By being an intentional role model, not only are you setting an example, but you're being thoughtful about that.

**AD:** For example, in my own lab, when I get rejected from a science journal that I've applied to submit a manuscript to, I could do two things. I could keep it private or I could share it widely, and I try to share it as widely as possible to show my students I'm not perfect, that there's four single space pages about the ways in which I'm apparently not perfect. And to model for them my response to that, which is not perfect, I model for them, like, oh, I'm really mad or I'm extremely discouraged, but then I model for them. Two days later, I printed it out, and I took a pen, and I underlined the parts that I agreed with, then I crossed out the ones I didn't, so I model them the getting back up again and the learning.

**AD:** I'm a model, you're a model, everyone's a role model. But I think some intentionality, recognizing that we're a role model, doing things a little more deliberately, that's the most important thing I can say, at any age, that's what people need. They need to see the full picture of what other people are doing to learn from them. I would just say this, too, at the younger ages, we already talked about sampling and how important it is. I do think, as you get older and as your time on the planet it starts to be like, well, if you're 50 and you're still sampling and you're like, "I don't know, maybe I'll quit." There is a point at which it makes sense to make a commitment and say, "Hey, I want to do it."

**AD:** And I'll just as a rule of thumb say when my daughters were in high school, I said to them, "Not only do we have the hard thing rule, your dad and I, but also there should be something that you can do for more than one year. Right? So, by the time you graduate from high school, you should say, 'There's something that I did for more than a year.' It can be anything, but try..." We said this in ninth grade, "Try to do something your junior year and your senior year," and there I just wanted them to begin to see what it would be like to climb a learning curve beyond the rookie part of the curve.

**AD:** And I think that this is something that all human beings crave. Everybody wants to see excellence in their own life, not just on YouTube, and so just to begin to get the sense that once you've gotten the basics down, that you can further improve in something, I think, is an important life lesson.

**LT:** Are there any don'ts as far as building grit and perseverance? Is there anything that kills it?

**AD:** The biggest don't is like a message to tiger parents. This is actually whether you're Asian or non-Asian, but this colloquial phrase of tiger parents who are maniacally obsessed with their kids' achievement and typically quite narrow in what that would even mean, like medical school, Harvard Medical School. And the big mistake there, the big don't is that what you're substituting for your child's intrinsic motivation is your motivation, which makes it extrinsic to your child. And to all the tiger parents out there who occasionally email me and ask me questions about how they can get their kid to play piano even longer or why can't they get their kid to study even harder, I want to say to them that nobody that I have studied who is truly world class at what they do is extrinsically motivated.

**AD:** They are intrinsically motivated. They have to want to do what they're doing, they have to be personally interested, and they have to feel like it's an expression of their values, not their parents' values or their neighbors' values. That is a common mistake, and I don't think it's an exclusively Asian mistake to make, even though the term is "tiger parents" from the, I think, Amy Chua book who, by the way, I've been told by people who know Amy Chua, she herself isn't even really a tiger parent because she's very encouraging of her two daughters to pursue what interests them.

**LT:** And she is, actually. I had a conversation with Amy on an earlier episode, she's terrific. Can you tell us, Angela, what you're currently working on or what you're going to be working on next?

**AD:** I've been wondering, my older daughter who's 19, said, "Oh, I wish there were a class in college that would help me be a better person," and I thought that was such an interesting question to ask. Grit is very narrowly about achieving your own long-term goals, but there has to be much more to being a good person than that. And imagine, and you don't even have to imagine, you can just think of the people who are really gritty, but have done horrible things in the world and set back other people from their goals, so I think there are three dimensions of living a good life. Maybe one of them, and the least important, is achievement, getting things done, you could call these strengths of will, like being self-controlled and gritty and proactive and so forth.

**AD:** But there are two other dimensions that I think are more important to being a good person. One is, and having a really wonderful life of the mind, being an independent thinker, so you could call these strengths of mind, but these would include imagination and curiosity, creativity, intellectual

humility, judgment, decision-making. I think a lot of the people you've interviewed on this podcast would be considered world class experts in that. And that to me, in a way, is what it means to be free, to really be able to think for yourself. And then the most important dimension, the third and last, and I'll say, these are the strengths of heart, this is generosity and gratitude, honesty and integrity, having some empathy for other people, and these are all about interpersonal relationships.

**AD:** I could also argue that having a sense of social purpose that your life would contribute to the greater good in the societal sense. So, strengths of heart, strengths of mind, and then lastly, in third place for the bronze medal, strengths of will. I think collectively this is what it means to live a good life and to be a good person. I think this is what Aristotle meant by character. So what I'm working on now is trying to put together everything that's been discovered scientifically about those three broad families of character strengths, and so I'm trying to see whether this is like tilting at windmills, it's too big, it's like nobody could ever do that, or whether we could really boil down the essentials so that my 19-year-old daughter and that other people could benefit by understanding what's the highlight reel from scientific research on living a good life.

**LT:** I can't wait until you do that research, that sounds so interesting. Before I ask for your three key takeaways, are there any other topics or is there anything else you'd like to discuss that you haven't already touched upon?

**AD:** No. I think implicit, Lynn, in this conversation is that I really like science. I know we both love data and evidence, and our grandparents did their best job raising our parents, and all the way back to our longest lived or farthest reaching back ancestors, but the wonderful thing about the young people growing up in the 21st century is that there really is the scientific method applied to these age-old questions of how do you become a grateful and humble person, where does confidence come from, where does empathy come from, and how do I become more caring for my fellow neighbor? And these are not just philosophical and religious questions, they're not just questions that you can read poetry about or ask your grandmother what worked for her, they're also questions that you can ask using random assignment controlled trials and quantitative research methods, and that's I think what excites me personally as a scientist, and also I think what might define the leap forward for the new generation.

**LT:** Angela, what are the three key insights or takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

**AD:** One is that talent and effort are not at all the same thing, and if we understand that, then maybe we can give effort its due and not get distracted just by thinking about talent as the be-all and end-all of what factors into achievement of any goal. The second is that through being an intentional role model, through conversations like this, Lynn, I think that if we care about grit or other aspects of character, we can be assured that these things are malleable, not fixed, and therefore there's plenty of room for every single one of us to get better in the ways that we care about, and the same, of course, for young people.

**AD:** And then finally, I want to make sure that everyone knows grit is not the most important thing there is to be. For my own daughters and for myself, I think honesty and kindness, the strengths of heart that I mentioned, are much more important, and arguably strengths of mind, an openness to new ideas, a humility about what we know, wise judgment and so forth. And then lastly, I do think grit does matter, and I'm very intent on making sure that we don't get the bronze medal position

confused with the gold medal and the silver medal positions, and that most important, we understand the character is plural, and that living a good life means not one thing, but many.

**LT:** Angela, this has been terrific. Thank you so much for our conversation, and thank you for all of your work.

**AD:** Thank you, Lynn. I very much enjoyed it.

**OUTRO male voice:** If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at [3takeaways.com](https://3takeaways.com) or follow us on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. Note that [3takeaways.com](https://3takeaways.com) is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at [3takeaways.com](https://3takeaways.com).