

Hidden Potential

The Science of Achieving Greater Things

Review by Lisa Murray-Roselli | Book by Adam Grant

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Do you find yourself wondering if you have reached your full potential? Adam Grant believes potential is more a matter of character than innate ability, and with opportunity and motivation, we can all achieve greater things.

Adam Grant is a practical optimist. Not one for hollow pep talks, he provides scientific and qualitative evidence for his guidance. *Hidden Potential* gives readers a unique perspective on the subject of achieving one's potential and a new way to measure success. Grant encourages us to change and expand systems of opportunity whenever and wherever possible, and to surround ourselves with robust structures for motivation.

Adam Grant is a top-rated professor at The Wharton's School, a renowned author and speaker, and an expert in organizational psychology. His curiosity and intelligence keep him searching for optimum and creative ways to help people sustain their internal motivation, constantly reevaluate assumptions, and find meaning in their lives and in their work. *Hidden Potential* is full of Grant's reliable and exciting ideas for achieving greater things.

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Readers will learn methods to

- develop character skills
- build scaffolding to prevail over challenges
- create systems in which opportunities thrive

INITIAL INSIGHTS

Character, motivation, and opportunity comprise the trio that can lead people to achieve their highest potential. On rare occasions, natural ability will triumph over that trio, but even the most naturally talented mathematicians, athletes, artists, etc. will only reach their highest potential if they combine that with the right character skills, find internal and external motivation, and are met with opportunities to demonstrate those abilities. We love the stories of people who came from hard-scrabble backgrounds and go on to achieve greatness. The common denominator in most of those stories is the trio, with natural ability in the numerator. Adam Grant wants readers to understand how to optimize that trio in their own lives, even if their natural ability is not as strong as they'd like.

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RETHINKING SUCCESS

Success is often measured by the prominence or extent of the achievement. Grant suggests that the distance traveled to meet with success should be valued on par with the achievement itself. Growth requires a set of character skills that are not generally included when we talk about accomplishments. There are many examples of athletes who persevere through financial hardship, lousy training facilities, injuries, and other obstacles to achieve greatness, and we honor those journeys, marvel at them even. But what about job applicants with noticeable gaps in their resumes because they had to take time off from work to care for sick family members or raise children? Or college applicants who don't have a long list of extra-curriculars or top grades because they had to work after school to help their families survive? These omissions should be investigated, not penalized.

There is a significant difference between a college applicant who has had all of the advantages of support and opportunity and an applicant without those advantages. Admissions officers would do well to look beyond the GPAs and the standardized test scores to consider the character skills of drive and determination that are necessary for a student who didn't go to an elite school or have a strong family or financial support system to a)

produce the grades necessary to apply to a good college and b) get through the daunting college application process. These kinds of character skills are often the best measure of future success.

Grant's intention is for *Hidden Potential* to provide scaffolding for readers to develop the character skills to achieve their full potential, create structures to sustain motivation, and build systems to broaden opportunity. If we find ourselves in positions of power, at any level, he encourages us to look more deeply into our definitions of success and honor the fortitude it takes for growth when people present themselves for assessment in any form. The measure of our potential is not accurately reflected in the height of our achievements but what it took to get there.

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CHARACTER, MOTIVATION, AND OPPORTUNITY

Activating hidden potential is possible for everyone. Above all else, this is the message Grant aims to pass along to readers. Character skills, motivational support, and systems of opportunity create the best environment for people to do their best, feel their best, and achieve their highest goals. Reaching one's potential is about more than being hired for a desired job, receiving an award, or getting the best grades, it's about living a creative and fulfilled life.

CHARACTER SKILLS

Proactivity, determination, and discipline are the three character skills Grant identifies as key to unlocking our potential and sustaining growth. In a study that set cognitive skills against character skills, 1,500 entrepreneurs were split in to three groups: one received cognitive skills training in areas such as finance, accounting, HR, marketing, and pricing, another received character skills training designed by psychologists to teach personal initiative such as proactivity, discipline, and determination, and the third group was the control group, which carried on without any training. After only five days of instruction and practice, the long-term benefits of character skills training far exceeded those of cognitive skills training.

Over the next two years, entrepreneurs who worked on character skills saw their firms' profits grow by an average of 30 percent, nearly triple those of the cognitive skills group. Grant emphasizes that not only can character skills lead to tangible results, but that it is never too late to build them. Additionally, character skills have plasticity—they can adapt to new situations and challenges because they are about the approach, not a set of rules or specific skills for defined conditions. The author also notes that character is separate from personality—character skills allow you to get through the hard days and overcome aspects of your personality that might hold you back.

Character skills really show their mettle in times of discomfort. Putting oneself in situations that are uncomfortable or unfamiliar is essential for growth. Some people have the confidence, warranted or not, to walk into any situation and presume they can handle whatever circumstances confront them. Most people, however, face the unfamiliar with feelings that

range from caution to fear. These feelings can be tempered by adopting the character skill of proactivity and being growth oriented, which entails a willingness to make mistakes, accept shortcomings, and ask for advice. Proactivity, determination, and discipline allow us to continually expand our knowledge and achievements and adapt to the unfamiliar with a focus on mastery rather than perfection. Making mistakes is part of the learning process and Grant believes we are judged on our best moments rather than our worst.

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CREATING AND SUSTAINING MOTIVATION

Finding balance, perhaps even joy, carefully selecting mentors and advisors, and maintaining high expectations are some of the most important drivers for creating and sustaining motivation. Grant is a proponent of mixing it up and taking breaks. Here in the US, this type of advice is rare, even scorned—we are a nation of no vacations, singular focus, and 24 hour availability, which is much to our personal detriment and actually slows productivity and creativity. Benefits of taking breaks include reducing fatigue and raising energy, enhancing creativity and providing space for new ideas to arise, improving recall, and strengthening learning. Some people see relaxing or finding time for play as a waste of time, but *Hidden Potential* provides evidence that relaxation and play are an investment in

our well-being and help to reset our intentions and nurture ideas that might otherwise remain stagnant.

Surrounding ourselves with inspirational and reliable mentors can help us navigate through difficult or confusing circumstances. Hitting a rut doesn't mean we have failed without recourse and plateauing doesn't mean that we have reached our peak. Grant recommends that we have a stable of guides who excel at conveying their knowledge and experience—guides who have our best interest at heart and proven expertise. They can help to change the perspective on obstacles from threat to challenges to overcome and opportunities for growth. This shift in mindset is critical for success.

A growth mindset goes hand-in-hand with high expectations. No one is inspired to do their best when expectations are low. *Hidden Potential* contains many examples of how high expectations coupled with high credibility yield success. If leaders hold high expectations and are credible authorities, employees will work harder, learn more, and perform better. While in schools, high expectations tend to inspire students to earn higher grades, even if they begin at a disadvantage. That is not to say there will not be challenges along the way—progress is filled with peaks and valleys. It is resilience, the ability to bounce back from failure having learned something valuable, that is the hallmark of growth and success.

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OPPORTUNITY AS A SYSTEM

People often mistake a lack of opportunity for a lack of will. This is a damaging assumption and can negatively affect the course of people's lives. Geography, finances, role models, and family circumstances are just some of the potentially limiting factors when it comes to opportunity. If children do not live in safe homes in safe neighborhoods with supportive adults who are present on a consistent basis, their natural talents may be suppressed. Imagine coming home with a backpack full of homework and facing empty cupboards, childcare responsibilities, no adult guidance, and safety issues. How would you have the time, energy, or mental fortitude to even open that backpack? This is just one example of the unseen barriers to opportunity.

Grant's research shows that our systems of opportunity often do not allow for examination of the complexities that influence poor performance. Or, in the case of grade point average (GPA) requirements for college admittance, admissions officers only take into consideration that average, rather than appraising the progress made from year one to year four of high school. The author believes that good systems of opportunity allow people to grow and to start where they are, rather than at some artificially imposed marker—admissions and hiring systems should honor potential, and late bloomers, as well as those who have had a bit of an easier road to travel. This type of inquiry should be deliberate and built into standard practices.

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PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Here are some ways to activate hidden potential:

Strengthen Character Skills

Learn to foster proactivity, discipline, and determination. These are the skills that will help you to work through challenges and find the courage to put yourself in unfamiliar situations. Character skills lead to an understanding of self and the confidence and adaptability necessary to reach your potential.

Create a Motivational Superstructure

Stay motivated through difficult times by creating a superstructure that includes credible mentors, regular relaxation and play, and an environment of high expectations. The strongest motivation is a sense of progress. Your motivational superstructure will help you to maintain resilience through the peaks and valleys.

Develop and Support Systems of Opportunity

Be mindful of the systems of opportunity from which you have benefitted and those that need to expand. Putting people first yields performance gains. Honor progress and potential as well traditional markers of success.

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FOR ADDITIONAL READING [AUTHOR INSTRUCTIONS 4.0]

- 1 *She Believed She Could: Show Up, Shine Bright, and Achieve Abundant Success* by Allison Walsh, John Wiley & Sons (US), © 2023, ISBN 978-1394174300.
- 2 *Lead Boldly: How to Coach Others to Greatness* by Hugh Blane, Red Wheel/Weiser, © 2024, ISBN 978-1632652119.
- 3 *What You Aren't Seeing: How Using Your Hidden Potential Can Help You Discover the Leader Within: The Inspiring Story of Herb Greenberg* by Patrick Sweeney, McGraw-Hill, © 2015, ISBN 978-0071849753.

PARTING THOUGHTS

Adam Grant believes there is no higher goal than seeking to improve ourselves every day. Fundamentally, *Hidden Potential* is about expanding our idea of what constitutes success and the multitude of ways we can help ourselves and one another to ignite potential. In every field, we often mistake confidence for competence, certainty for credibility, and quantity for quality. Grant maintains that having a healthy dose of imposter syndrome indicates a tremendous potential to succeed—people who don't have a baseless sense of confidence and certainty are always looking to improve themselves. The science, narrative evidence, and insightful analysis of *Hidden Potential* will inspire readers to work together to achieve their highest potential.

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Everyone has hidden
potential. My goal is to
illuminate how we can all
rise to achieve greater
things.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ADAM GRANT has been Wharton's top-rated professor for 7 straight years. As an organizational psychologist, he is a leading expert on how we can find motivation and meaning, rethink assumptions, and live more generous and creative lives. He has been recognized as the world's #2 most influential management thinker and one of Fortune's 40 under 40.

He is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of 6 books that have sold millions of copies and been translated into 45 languages. Adam hosts the TED podcasts Re:Thinking and WorkLife, which have been downloaded over 70 million times. He has received awards for distinguished scholarly achievement from the Academy of Management, the American Psychological Association, and the National Science Foundation, and been recognized as one of the world's most-cited, most prolific, and most influential researchers in business and economics.

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ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

- 1 *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*, Viking, © 2021, ISBN 978-1984878106.
- 2 *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy*, Knopf, © 2017, ISBN 978-1524732684.
- 3 *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World*, Viking, © 2016, ISBN 978-0525429562.
- 4 *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success*, Viking, © 2013, ISBN 978-0670026555.

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