

Developing grit, and a grateful attitude to work

Grit is not a new idea, nor even a new buzzword.

Grit remains, however, something that schools and parents seem to have failed to engender in large swathes of young people. Most people accept that grit and other soft skills are important but, because soft skills are difficult to measure, schools continue to prioritise league table rankings. The pernicious influence of league tables continues...

A generation has come of age where many more individuals perceive themselves to be 'one in a million'. I'm reminded of the popular song from *Matilda*:

"One can hardly move for beauty and brilliance these days. It seems that there are millions of these one-in-a-millions these days. "Specialness" seems de rigueur. Above average is average – go figure. Is it some modern miracle of calculus, that such frequent miracles don't render each one un-miraculous."

Among this generation there is an underlying sense of entitlement. I don't blame them. They have been advertised to since birth; they have had credit and loans on a plate; they have been overly molly-coddled; and they have been overwhelmed by a strange combination of fictional sit-com characters, reality TV and social media stars, who paint a picture of perfection to be achieved. They have even been encouraged by governments to believe that they deserve 'more' than their parents and grandparents had (capitalism, after all, requires consumers to always want to have 'more').

More than what? More than the jobs that people too often now look down their noses at, for a start: working unsociable hours in fast food restaurants or in a shop; working in physically demanding roles harvesting crops or packaging produce; or working in essential roles receiving abuse from members of the public, as a police officer, nurse, benefits assessor, or parking attendant.

An interview I conducted with a potential NQT candidate highlighted this to me. I realise that job seekers are encouraged to ask questions of prospective employers during interviews, but when the interviewee asked "why should I come and work for you?" I felt deflated. You would think that a NQT would be keen to land a job in a school like Gresham's; independent schools often do have a reputation for having well-behaved students who achieve excellence in academic and extra-curricular pursuits, smaller class sizes, impressive facilities, curriculum freedom, and so on. On top of that we are based in beautiful North Norfolk...! Perhaps I overreacted and the candidate was more a victim of recruitment-agency pep-talks than anything else, but my lasting impression was of an 'entitled' candidate who was looking for some further guarantee or incentive before committing to getting stuck in to furthering their career.

It's difficult to explain exactly why I felt so irked but I couldn't help but think that something has been lost. There used to be a real sense of pride associated with doing 'an honest day's work', whatever the role might have been. There was also a real sense of achievement among individuals who, having started on the bottom rung of a company's ladder and having been recognised for sheer effort levels,

or stand-out skill, were fortunate enough to work their way up the ladder – maybe from tea lady to typist; or from floor sweeper to factory foreman.

That some youngsters now approach job interviews in the same way as they might approach buying a luxury holiday concerns me. Some expect to be given a ‘one-in-a-million’ job, despite being one of millions of applicants, many of whom are not yet fit for the work place!

As well as a clutch of impressive grades or a degree from university, young people need to show they are capable of adding value to an employer’s organisation through hard work, commitment, passion and determination. They want to employ people who are willing to put effort in to earn their way up to the ‘luxury holiday’ equivalent job roles, not those who are going to be dissatisfied within just a couple of months, struggling with responsibility and every day challenges.

People like Gresham’s alumnus James Dyson embody this determined nature to a T. Clearly an intelligent and driven individual, it may not be as well-known that it took Dyson 15 years and 5,126 prototypes to find unequivocal success with the Dyson vacuum cleaner. Dyson credits his time at Gresham’s for giving him the right sort of environment to develop these essential character traits:

“Gresham’s has played a hugely important role in my life. I spent my formative years at the institution – a wonderful time. Gresham’s gave me the opportunity to experiment, and the freedom to develop on my own terms. I credit the school with imbuing in me much of the grit and determination which stood me in good stead later in life.”

It’s worth noting two things about what Dyson says. He doesn’t credit being forced outside in terrible weather to play rugby, or enduring other potentially uncomfortable experiences, like giving a presentation against his will, as encouraging grit. He does credit the opportunity and freedom he had to be himself, to develop on his own terms. Both of these points provide a helpful steer as to the sort of environment that supports students in developing into well-rounded individuals, but neither of these ideas are new: Dyson was at school more than 60 years ago.

For some, independent boarding schools have been traditionally thought of as the best environment for young people to develop soft skills and, while I would agree with this thinking, it is interesting to note that until recently people expected this to happen through some sort of osmosis. Of course, through the camaraderie of dorm rooms, the extra-curricular activities on offer and schemes such as the CCF there may well be more frequent opportunities for young people to practise resilience and develop grit. Even with more ‘modern’ concerns such as the influence of ‘always-on’ social media and smart phones, most schools like ours haven’t allowed children to use their phones during the day for many years anyway. So we’re not doing anything enormously different here at Gresham’s – but what has changed is that there is now much wider discussion among educators and parents and a lot more sharing of best practice thinking. This is positive – but more still needs to be done to boost the number of schools who enjoy the freedom to take soft skills seriously. Currently, many schools are able to do little more than simply pay lip service to the idea.

Is it in recognition of this drought of grit in the UK that the new Education Secretary, Damian Hinds, has called, [in his first official speech in post](#), for schools to “teach children resilience through public speaking and sport to help them in the workplace”? He said:

“There is much outside the relevant qualifications which matters a great deal as well. That you believe that you can achieve, that you can stick with the task at hand and that you understand the length there is between the effort you make now and the reward that may come in future and the resilience to bounce back from the knocks that inevitably life brings.”

This is exactly right. We need to encourage young people, in their first paper-round or Deliveroo gig, restaurant job or admin role, factory shift or sales role, that they are not wasting time! All work experience, and the life experience also gained, is valuable. What’s more, if they develop the positive attitudes and ‘soft skills’ to thrive in early job roles, not only might they be noticed by their employer and given new opportunities, but they will also find it easier later on in their working lives when they encounter pressures, deadlines, responsibilities and more complex challenges.

I would encourage young people to be grateful for the work opportunities they are given and to throw themselves into each task and take pride in working to the best of their ability. In time, skills and expertise will be developed. I remember Anthony Habgood, Chairman of Bank of England and another Gresham’s alumnus, painting a picture one Gresham’s Speech Day of a fulfilling career, in which opportunities to show off will present themselves. These are the times to take the spotlight, and be picked out.