

Elite and Reliable Performance

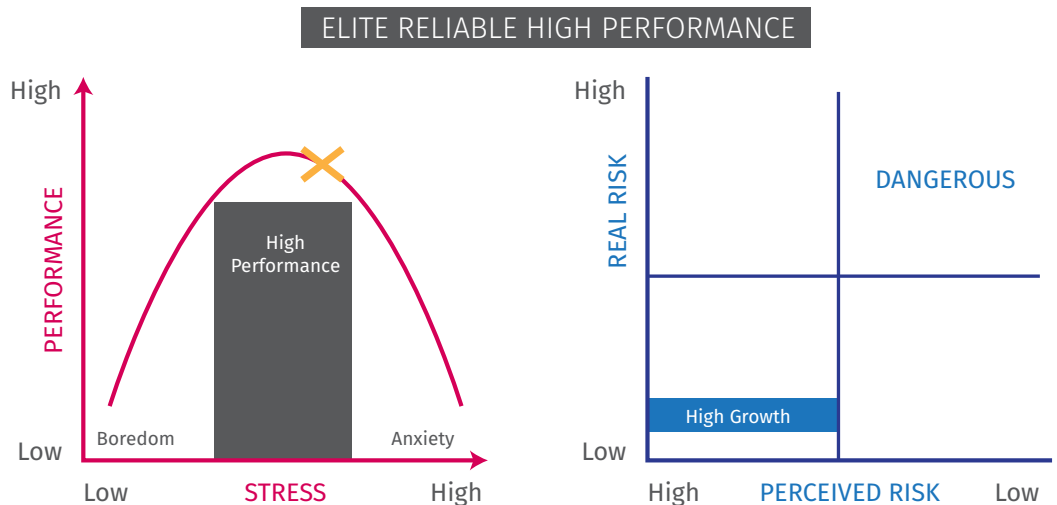
Every thoughtful organization is looking for individuals who have the courage to deliver elite and reliable high performance. This level of performance requires us to learn to lean into discomfort. John Hagel talks about the comfort zone and the learning zone. The comfort zone, where the majority of us live, feels safe and easy. Courage and growth, however, are found in the learning zone.¹

Look at the graph on the left side. High performance threads the needle between boredom and anxiety. We grow when we lean into discomfort, and this takes courage. Perhaps we can motivate ourselves to up our game by looking at the acronym VUCA, which stands for volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. A VUCA

world rewards intelligent risk and innovation, while it punishes complacency and fearfulness. We can avoid becoming VUCA roadkill by learning to improve and grow continuously.

Now look to the graph on the right side. Courage isn't about taking crazy risk; that's just dangerous. What we want to avoid doing is something where the actual risk is high and our perceived risk is low. At times, our fear screams at us, "Hey! Pay attention here. This danger is the real deal." Worst of all is when perceived risk is low, when in fact real risk is high. Comfort or complacency can lead a person to believe that risk is low, when the real risk is high. VUCA rewards innovation that embraces change and punishes complacency and risk aversion.

Courage combines intelligent risk with wisdom. Our best opportunity for high growth comes by leaning into activities where the perceived risk is high, but the actual risk is low. For example, we may feel vulnerable discussing virtues with our teammates.



We might wonder whether we are the best person to facilitate a discussion on this topic. We might think that no one in their right mind would claim perfection when it comes to virtue and that we are just setting ourselves up for failure. We might be afraid to put ourselves in a vulnerable position. Yet, in this case, the actual risk is low, even though we think it's high. By improving our practice of virtue, we loosen the grip of fear that holds us and our team back from elite reliable performance. We can reduce this perceived risk by saying, "I'm not perfect. I'm just trying to get better. Can you help me, and can you help us get better by practicing virtue?" The key word here is to "practice," not "master" virtue.

Courage and Grit

It is easy to see the courage exercised by extraordinary leaders such as Gandhi, Mandela, and Martin Luther King, Jr. By comparison, we might think that unless we do something remarkable, we won't make a difference. Not so. Leading change, resolving a conflict, taking intelligent risk—these are things all of us can do.

Aristotle observed, “Where it is in our power to act it is also in our power not to act.”² Acting courageously is a virtue within the reach of each one of us. Do so routinely, and courage will become engrained in your character. Both courage and cowardice are learned habits.

Grit is an enabler of courage. Grit is the stamina to persevere through life—not as a sprinter—but as a passionate marathon runner. Grit or persistence is the means. The reason we don't quit is governed by our purpose (commitment to something bigger than yourself) and by passion (willing sacrifice for this purpose). To quote Nietzsche, “*He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.*”³

It is comforting to know that often the people who have grit are more successful than those with intelligence or even talent. The willingness to wait for success, to persist through obstacles, and to make corrections gives those with grit an advantage. Duckworth uses two simple equations to explain grit's impact on achievement:⁴

Talent x effort = skill

Skill x effort = achievement

Notice that effort appears twice. This is why effort has a disproportionate impact on success and growth.

Just so there is no misunderstanding, by grit, we don't mean stubbornness. We're not talking about an unwillingness to learn and change. Quite the opposite. Grit is a can-do attitude, a mindset prepared to endure through adversity. It is a determination to grow, to learn, and to improve.

1. Hagel, John. @jhagel, January 2, 2016, <https://twitter.com/jhagel/status/683295782347276292>
2. Aristotle. (1908). *Nicomachean Ethics*. (W. D. Ross, Trans.). Retrieved from <http://a.co/bgFLR8j>
3. Nietzsche, F. (1911). *Twilight of the Idols*. (A. M. Ludovici, Trans.). Retrieved from <http://a.com/6Q1kmGf>
4. Duckworth, Angela (April 2013), “Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance,” TED Talk Education.