

Work Ethic is Not a Core Personality Trait

I was listening to an EconTalk episode with a lady named Angela Duckworth. She wrote a book on grit and work ethic. The conversation was okay, but I found it problematic in its applicability and general use as knowledge.

I don't find worth ethic and grit to be core personality traits. They are emergent traits based off of several factors.

1. A culture/economic atmosphere that rewards success in the given realm.
2. An individual perception that you are capable of attaining the goal at hand.
3. The integrated belief that the work is worth the reward.
4. A contentment in finding a certain kind of identity at the task at hand.

Without any 4 of these factors, a person won't feel inspired, and without inspiration, grit and work ethic won't emerge.

This is an important distinction. Maybe 10% of people won't feel competent or inspired by almost anything and will never seem to have grit/work ethic. Maybe 1% of people will seem to feel competent and inspired by almost every task and seem to always have grit/work ethic. However, the rest of us will only have the "personality traits" emerge when the conditions warrant it.

Growing up I half-assed a lot of work and cut a lot of corners. At times, when I was a kid, I thought I just didn't have a great work ethic and others would tell me that I didn't. Of course, what in the work that I was given would inspire me? Parental approval? Avoiding punishment? Altruism? Grades? No way.

As an adult, I love working. I will never retire and I want to buy other businesses with time. People would say I have a good work ethic, but I don't have to really conjure anything to work. I just want to do it.

Sure. Some people will never really feel inspired. They will feel incompetent or surrounded with poisonous incentives. I am sure most people in communist/socialist societies had little-no grit/work ethic. For the rest of us, the issue isn't conjuring work ethic/grit, it is finding the right incentives and atmospheres that will inspire us.

Most studies on grit/work ethic are studying almost a tautology that seems ridiculous when stated another way. "People who are inspired and care about the work they are doing, do it better." Man, that's deep.