

Transcript CUES Podcast 135 Caroline Adams Miller Grit

August 2022

By Caroline Adams Miller

Tony Covington 00:04

You're listening to the CUES Podcast episode 135.

Tony Covington 00:07

Thank you CUES Podcast listeners for tuning in. Today's show will be a conversation about grit--what it is, what it isn't, the value of it and how to get some in your life.

Tony Covington 00:20

As you know, on this podcast you can hear from a wide range of cross-industry experts discussing trends and topics relevant to you. Today's guest is author, educator and coach Caroline Adams Miller. My name is Tony Covington, and I'm the vice president of business development for TalentED and a former NFL player.

Tony Covington 00:40

So much of what Caroline says in this show resonates with me. Caroline first started thinking about grit while completing her master's of applied positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania.

Tony Covington 00:53

Angela Duckworth, winner of the 2013 MacArthur Genius Grant for her research on grit said of Caroline, "I don't know anybody who has thought more than Caroline about how to apply the scientific research on grit and achievement to our own lives."

Tony Covington 01:11

Caroline's latest book is Getting Grit: The Evidence-based Approach to Cultivating Passion, Perseverance and Purpose. In this show, Caroline gives great ideas about whether grit can be cultivated--it can--whether it's contagious--it is-- as well as who does not need to cultivate grit. You'll love what she says in this episode, and may well be inspired to register for Directors Conference in December, where Caroline will present a keynote titled, Bridging Grit, Resilience and Happiness: A Revolutionary Approach to Game-Changing Results.

Tony Covington 01:47

For sure you're going to find insights in this episode that you can apply in your work and in your life.

Tony Covington 01:53

So let's get started.

Tony Covington 01:57

Welcome to the show, Caroline. How are you?

Caroline Adams Miller 02:00

I'm good. Thanks for having me.

Tony Covington 02:02

Awesome. Thank you for blessing our audience with your time. I know that it's precious. And we appreciate you taking the time for us today.

Caroline Adams Miller 02:08

My pleasure.

Tony Covington 02:09

So let's jump right in. How did you first come to be focused on grit?

Caroline Adams Miller 02:15

Um, several different ways. One was Angela Duckworth was running in and out of classrooms at Penn when I was getting this master's of applied positive psychology in 2005. She's now known for her grit work, got a MacArthur Genius Grant Award. But I was writing the first evidence-based goal-setting book for the mass market at that point. And I knew from all the research I was reading that the happiest people wake up to hard goals, not easy goals, hard goals. And I realized that this thing called grit that she was studying the spelling bee winners and Special Forces and people who stay married, I had to understand that special sauce if I was going to be talking about hard goals in my book, *Creating Your Best Life*.

Caroline Adams Miller 02:56

And so that was how I learned about the quality of grit. In the process, in hindsight, I became particularly fascinated by the fact that I'd had to develop it in order to overcome my eating disorder, bulimia, 40 years ago, because at the time, nobody got better. It was a death sentence. And I wanted to live more than I wanted to die. And I realized in hindsight is I learned about the research and wrote the book *Getting Grit*, that I cultivated it and that it was separate from both success and talent. And it's really about that special sauce, that X factor, that hard work and passion and all these other qualities. And I realized that I needed to tell that story too. Because people need to understand not just that they can cultivate grit, but why they need to cultivate it.

Tony Covington 03:46

And how do you define grit? How do you personally define grit?

Caroline Adams Miller 03:49

Grit is a mixture of qualities and behaviors. So it starts with this basic passion and perseverance in pursuit of long-term goals. That is the given definition in the field of psychology. Because I work with so

many just people, CEOs, senior leadership teams, all over the world, what I realized is it had to go further and it had to go into the quality going outside of comfort zone and taking risks to live the best life. But in the process of doing so, it has to inspire and awe other people to want to behave that way as well. No giving speeches, no kind of telling people what to do. But people have what I call authentic grit simply by virtue of how they live and how they do hard things. They collectively uplift the communities around them. And that to me is the highest and best definition and use of grit.

Tony Covington 04:50

Well, it's amazing. I was listening to Kara Lawson, Duke's head coach of basketball, and she was saying something along the lines of learning how to do hard things well. Life doesn't get easier. You know, the test doesn't get easier. Basketball doesn't get easier. It's because you are you learn how to do hard things well, so it seems like that falls right in line with with what you're discussing in regards to grit.

Caroline Adams Miller 05:14

Well, it's not just doing any hard things well. It's about doing the things that you long to accomplish, not somebody else's goals, not something because you think you should do it. Grit is really defined also by the fact that these are your goals, your unique goals that you want to accomplish. And why is that? Because it's this passion, this inner passion that keeps you going when the going gets tough. And if it's someone else's goal, you're not going to have that. So it has to be your why not someone else's why.

Caroline Adams Miller 05:47

Yes, I believe and can prove that grit can be cultivated. And we know it because when you look at people who have some of the ingredients earlier in life, maybe talent, maybe patience, maybe humility, all of those things together don't necessarily lead into grit. But once you pull them together and harness them, or add in the behaviors and the character values in some cases and strengths, that cannot be pointed in the direction of your particular why, we know that people can cultivate this quality of grit simply by virtue of watching people go through major life transitions or for the first time in their lives deciding or going after something that's important to them, not someone else, is worth fighting for. And you see behaviors that maybe they've never demonstrated before. So once you know how to define grit and spot grit, you begin to see it all the time.

Tony Covington 05:47

Perfect. Love it. So Caroline, do you feel that grit can be cultivated and how do we know?

Tony Covington 06:50

Okay, well, is there a such thing as too much grit?

Caroline Adams Miller 06:55

Yes. When I when I wrote the book Getting Grit, I had to sit back again and think about how is my version of grit, which I call authentic grit, how is it different from let's say, Angela Duckworth's grit. And what I realized is that when you work with people outside of a lab and in human conditions, athletes, salespeople, CEOs, composers, etc., what you realize very quickly is that the overuse of grit is a weakness. And I call it stupid grit. And there's many examples of stupid grit. For example, an

entrepreneur who is so certain the thing he or she has come up with is the answer to a certain challenge. And they refuse to take advice or market data or feedback from a board of directors and they don't listen. Stupid grit is marked by arrogance and a lack of humility. And so stupid grit is also what we see in mountaineering. It's called summit fever, when you're so drunk hugging to the top of a mountain, that you aren't listening to the Sherpas or being told, "Hey, there's an avalanche coming or a white out or the conditions are changing," and you're drunk on getting to the destination that you really want to get to. So stupid grit is when conditions have changed and you refuse to take in information or data from the environment, or other people that would caution you to change course, or think a little bit differently about how to behave.

Tony Covington 08:28

Interesting. So what's the difference between selfie grit and faux grit?

Caroline Adams Miller 08:34

I love this. So these are two other definitions I came up with. So selfie grit is something that I think is so endemic to the times we live in. It's been called the me me me generation. In fact, those are the most common words used in songs written in the 80s and 90s where I mean, my you know, it's been called the me, me, me generation, self-esteem generation. So what what I saw when I looked again at the conditions where grit existed, but it was perverted grit, it repelled people as opposed to inspire them. I saw this version of selfie grit where people do do hard things, but they talk about it all the time. They take credit for other people's work at times, but for the most part, they are doing hard, hard things, but they insist on letting everyone know. There's no humility.

Caroline Adams Miller 09:22

Again, my poster child for that was the Special Forces officer who decided to break his anonymity, which is really anathema in Special Forces, in this case, the Navy SEALs, and he said, "Well, I shot Osama bin Laden. It wasn't my teammates. It was me." And so I think there's this grabbing of credit that we we've seen in the millennial generation and even Gen X where everyone wants to be a star and have a YouTube moment. So they're not comfortable being in the background or letting other people have oxygen. So that's, that's selfie grit.

Caroline Adams Miller 09:54

Faux grid is the opposite. That's where you want everyone to think you've done hard things but you don't have what it takes to do hard things. These are people who fake their research when they're going after a PhD. Or even just take Enron when they were giving tours to people who were visiting their the company, and they had a whole floor dummied up with fake traders and fake phones and everything else to try to pretend they were doing the hard work of making money when, in fact, they were defrauding investors hand over fist. So there's a lot of faux grit performance, enhancing drugs, think Lance Armstrong wants everyone to think he won the Tour de France fair and square, but he didn't do it. So there are corrupted forms of grit out there that always repel people and are often marked by a lack of humility.

Tony Covington 10:43

So in essence, I guess that's, that's cheating, that's cheating. And in essence, that's what it is faux grit is really cheating the process.

Caroline Adams Miller 10:51

Absolutely. Skipping the steps, just the not being willing to put in the work or the time. The most egregious example I saw when I was writing my book was people who buy a fake Medal of Honor award on eBay, at a flea market, and then they'll put it on the resume or put it on and wear it in a parade. I mean, that's the highest military honor in the United States. And I think there are fewer than 80 living winners of the Medal of Honor. I mean, the audacity of wanting people to think that you had that kind of intrepidity and gallantry under fire. It's just nauseous. And yet people do it because they want everyone to think they did that hard, hard thing.

Caroline Adams Miller 11:33

What I know about grit is that many people long to have it, and they're dying to know how do you build it because we do admire people who go above and beyond and don't take the easy way out, take the hard way. And they don't take shortcuts. And I think people are just craving the steps to have the right kind of grit and looking for role models all the time.

Tony Covington 11:58

Do you think grit is contagious though?

Caroline Adams Miller 12:01

Grit is indeed contagious. Some of that has come from Angela Duckworth's research where she found that your grit score, this very simple 12-question questionnaire, I wanted to administer to West Point incoming cadets. The ones who had the slightly lower grit scores, because, you know, let's, let's just face it, if you're going to wit West Point, you probably have grit. But there were some who had lower and some who had higher. They roomed the lower-grit cadets with the higher-grit cadets and they found that that was sufficient to raise grit scores, simply because it's a lot of behaviors and things that you begin to observe as a difference-maker. And so that is one of the ways.

Caroline Adams Miller 12:40

I'll tell you one other way I saw it. This is a story I have in Getting Grit. I saw a coach on ESPN, a football coach of a high school team in Tennessee. And he was talking about how an Iraq war veteran who had lost his legs had asked his high school where he had been three-sport athlete if he could just come cut the grass. They didn't even have to pay him. He just wanted to wake up for something, something bigger than himself. And he just wanted to cut the grass and be useful. Well, the coach goes on ESPN and says, "I have to tell you the most remarkable thing happened to my team of whiny teenage boys, who said, 'Oh, it's too hot. the bugs, the two-a-days.'" He said they all silently watch this man cutting the grass without legs. And they began to work harder. Grit is contagious. You want to embed somebody with those qualities in your organization, on your team, in your school environment in your family, because we know that simply observing and being around it, it has that effect of elevating and uplifting other people's behaviors.

Tony Covington 13:41

To move forward on that point as a great aficionado as I'd like to call you, how do you feel about the participation trophy? Everybody gets to a trophy. Everybody gets to play. You know, it's that whole era of given, not earned. How do you feel about that?

Caroline Adams Miller 14:00

I don't feel good about it. And that's a piece of what I wrote about in the introduction to my my book Getting Grit because I was so appalled to see the difficulties, the degree of difficulty being stripped out of my three children's lives as they were growing up. I mean, suddenly, everyone was a winner. Suddenly there was a mercy rule. In every single single game they played in, you didn't keep score. There was even a swim team we belong to where we were told the record board had been hidden from the children because the parents were afraid that the children would be discouraged to see the Olympians had swum there when they were younger and that they'd been very, very fast and they thought it would hurt their feelings. This is why playgrounds have been dumbed down. This is why you can't play tag on a lot of elementary school playgrounds because you might break someone's bone. Sledding has been outlawed in a lot of towns.

Caroline Adams Miller 14:56

So how do I feel about it? It infuriates me because when you look at the research on what happened to the self-esteem generation, this parenting movement where you just told your children they were great, they didn't even have to do anything. They were great. You know, no valedictorians, everybody gets an A. What you find is that, you know, there were a lot of narcissists and sociopaths who were developed because of this because they all began to believe they were entitled to things simply because they existed. They should all get a B for just setting foot in a class. The average time of male marathoners in that generation went backwards by 42 minutes, the average time, and I'm not talking, I'm not talking about the most elite ones. But, you know, people stopped taking risks, they stopped becoming entrepreneurs. And you know, they stopped climbing trees and breaking their legs. So I don't feel good about it. And I think the pendulum has begun to swing the other way.

Caroline Adams Miller 15:49

But I quickly want to say that there are many, many underserved youth who come from disadvantaged backgrounds who do not need to hear the message that they need more grit. They've got grit simply by virtue of getting up and getting to school in the morning. They don't need to be taught grit; they need to be taught hope and maybe goal-setting. So this isn't a message that's universal for everyone. Plenty of people have written they don't even know they have it because they're just getting by day to day. But by and large, there was a movement where we had to begin to teach young adults how to be adults. Courses on adulting began to proliferate on college campuses. They've stopped allowing everyone to bring their family pet to college campuses now because that was being so abused, and people were bringing pigs into college dorms, and the pigs were growing and breaking the furniture.

Caroline Adams Miller 15:52

Just a small example from my neighborhood park. Now, Katie Ledecky, the greatest swimmer of all time, lives right around the corner from me. I even drove her to swim practice when she was a little girl. And my son was in her lane. And, you know, I was passing her house on the way to the Fourth of July parade. And they had winners this year, winners and losers. And Katie Ledecky is infamous for talking

about how she got where she got by setting really hard goals and learning from failure. So I think it really corrupted and retarded an entire generation of youth, not all youth, of course, because many youth learn from sports or from the military or from Boy Scouts, you know, get getting Eagle Scout, found and great parenting parents who refuse to accept easy A's and participation trophies, they did learn this quality of grit, and I want to, so I think we're going back there.

Caroline Adams Miller 17:38

So you know, enough's enough, let's stand on our own two feet and do hard things to be satisfied with the fact that we gave it our best. If we begin to teach goal-setting and the qualities of grit to every generation that's coming, I do believe that levels of anxiety and depression will go down because people will feel like they have autonomy in their lives and that they can create mastery experiences because they know what it takes to get an authentic compliment that relates to doing hard things. When we take a shortcut and kind of do this faux grit thing with all our children, we are taking the value of learning about hard work right out of their lives, and we're not arming them for the future. And the future is going to be hard, and we're all watching it unfold in front of us. And we have to be armed with the best of behaviors and character strengths and values in order to not just survive, but thrive.

Tony Covington 18:33

I could not agree more. Who does not need to cultivate grit?

Caroline Adams Miller 18:38

Well, I would say that it's children and and people quite often who are already in difficult circumstances where they have to work very hard just to get the basics of life, you know, making decisions do I keep the electricity on or do I buy food, kids who have to wake up and walk through, let's just say violent neighborhoods to get to school to get to an after-school activity. That's not really about grit, they often have grit, it's different kinds of quality. So I think it's it's not the message we want to give to everyone. We have to be thoughtful about how we talk about grit and what it really does involve.

Tony Covington 19:15

That's I mean, that's amazing it you know, those are the individuals who have that survival instinct because when folks are used to getting things that they may not have earned, they don't know what it's like when when it hits the fan and and life becomes extremely difficult. They don't know how to survive, you know, it becomes a woe-is-me mentality. And so, you know, they fall to the wayside, whereas those that may have understood what the struggle is, what survival is and that that innate grit that they've had to have even though they not didn't know that they had it, you know, they they know how to fight and keep keep keep on keeping on.

Caroline Adams Miller 19:53

Yeah, absolutely. I think that we really have to look long and hard at the people who get to the top of any profession or any, any thing that people go out and try to do and endeavor to do, and it's people who have this quality of grit. And it's not because you were born into a special family. It's not something you can buy. It's it's the quality of behavior. It's humility. It's goal-setting. It's working with other people. It's having resilience. It's having the ability to self-talk, to get yourself into the mindset where you

change the channel when you want to quit. It's about having people who believe in you as well, creating that optimism.

Caroline Adams Miller 19:53

And there is great research showing that if you have too few setbacks in life, too few major setbacks where your values are questioned and your world is rocked, it's as damaging to have too few as it is to have too many. Everyone needs between five and seven really significant setbacks in order to find out who they really are, what they're made of, who their friends are, what it takes to survive and thrive. And without that, life really never has the sweetness that it has when you work for what you want, and you enjoy it when you get it because nothing is as enjoyable as the thing that you worked hard for. And there's so much research on that, many TED talks about that.

Caroline Adams Miller 20:32

So I just think you boil it all down to what is it you will not regret pursuing? And what are you willing to do to take those risks and go outside your comfort zone to make sure that you live without regrets. And those are the people at the end of life who are not in the nursing homes, which has been studied, they're not the one saying, you know, wow, I lived someone else's life, not the life I was meant to live. Because that's the number one regret of people in hospice care is that they didn't do that they didn't take risks. They didn't pursue their dreams. They passed out programs for other people, and they never got on stage in their own lives.

Tony Covington 21:17

Wow, that is absolutely amazing. Before we get you out of here, we usually end with something called a message in a bottle. And what that is, what is the message that you would leave to the younger to your younger self in a bottle to find if it will float down the ocean?

Caroline Adams Miller 22:14

Oh, it's always an emotional question for me. I would leave the message that when you love well and love much and choose carefully who should be the closest to you, you will always survive and thrive and that you should always pull other people along with you. Because I really do believe you can't keep what you don't give away. And so I would be sure to choose the right people but then make sure I pulled other people along with me as I went forward.

Tony Covington 22:45

Excellent. Caroline, thank you so much for being on our show today and taking time for us.

Caroline Adams Miller 22:50

Oh, I'm deeply appreciative that you gave me the time to talk about something that I'm so passionate about, and it really matters in the world right now more than ever.

Tony Covington 23:01

I would like to thank you, our listeners, for taking time out of your busy schedules to listen to today's episode of the CUES Podcast. And many thanks to Caroline Adams Miller for sharing great ideas about

grit. You can see Caroline present at Directors Conference being held December 4 through 7 in Las Vegas. Find out more and register at cues.org/dc.

Tony Covington 23:26

A full transcript of this episode can be found at CUmanagement.com/podcast135. You can also find more great credit union-specific content at CUmanagement.com.

Tony Covington 23:39

And near and dear to my heart, you can learn more about how TalentED can help develop the leaders of your favorite nonprofit at talentED.com. That's talent ED.com. Thanks again for listening today.

Tony Covington 23:54

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