

True Grit will be Truly Invaluable

As an amateur footballer I was once told by a silky ball player to “stick to heading and tackling!” The same boy scored half a dozen wonder goals in his first season yet quickly found himself on the bench and, in the end, looking for a new club. For me this was an early lesson in leadership - in a team that needs to grind out results the luxury players quickly give way to those who can ‘dig in’ and deliver wins. When the chips are down give me consistent grit over occasional flare every time. Regardless of size or sector, businesses, managers and employees are facing choppy waters ahead (a ‘relegation battle’ to continue the football analogy). For me it will be those who display grit (as individuals and as teams) who will survive and go on to enjoy success in the future. As such, I thought it would be worth investigating what is meant by ‘grit’ and how local business leaders can develop it within themselves and their firms. According to Duckworth and Seligman from The Positive Psychology Centre at the University of Pennsylvania, grit is “the determination to accomplish an ambitious, long-term goal despite the inevitable obstacles.” They argue that grit is made up of five component parts.

Persistence – the ability to stick at it, persevere and work hard. Many performance experts contend that it takes at least a decade of hard work or practice to become highly successful in most endeavours. Furthermore, the ability to persist in the face of obstacles is almost always an essential ingredient in major achievements. Richard Dunwoody MBE recently opened a Podium event by playing a video montage of himself falling off more than 50 horses! The good news then for local businesses is that, perhaps even more than talent, grit can be cultivated and strengthened.

Passion – the ability to be single-minded and have your imagination captured by something. More good news for local firms is that passion doesn’t always come first. Perseverance can itself foster passion - often the most fascinating aspects of a topic become apparent only after deep immersion. By empowering staff to deliver on challenging yet potentially valuable projects firms create leaders all over the field, and more importantly, a gritty and effective team.

Ambition – the ability to set goals and know where you want to go. Truly gritty people have no fear of challenge, in fact they tend to set especially challenging long-term goals for themselves. In business (and in football), ‘winners’ don’t tend to suffer ‘existors’ terribly well. The lesson for local firms is beware of those who don’t know where they are going. Speaking at one of our MLN events the ‘First Lady of Football’ Ms Karren Brady described three types of people “those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who wonder what happened!” Those who ‘watch and wonder’ will be relegated!

Self-discipline – the ability to focus on what needs to be done. Those with true grit do not waste time or energy on easy/meaningless tasks and they do not give in to whims. They identify what needs to be done and they do it with full commitment. In football this is known as ‘doing the ugly things well’. In business, as in football, it just takes one or two individuals to lack self-discipline or to ‘hide’ and the whole team will pay the penalty.

Optimism – the ability to avoid despondency and to retain a positive frame of mind and belief in the future. High-achievers hang in there, they genuinely believe that in the end they will win, and until they do, they just keep on pushing. We are not famed for our optimism in this country but it is an

attribute of grit that we simply must work at (for inspiration see Liverpool FC, Istanbul, May 2005!) Optimism breeds success. Companies (and economies) that communicate valid positivity will win business.

Grit is an unsung component of self-leadership and in the weeks and months that lie ahead it may just prove to be the key ingredient. Any firm that continues to carry luxury players, passengers or whingers will struggle. The businesses, managers and employees who perform with grit will do well.....just ask anyone who has played in a relegation battle on a freezing Saturday in mucky Mallusk!

Kevin Kelly is co-founder and director of Podiem Ltd and regularly consults to local firms on strategy creation and implementation.