



GRIT

The Secret to Advancement

STORIES OF SUCCESSFUL WOMEN LAWYERS

Introduction

WHY GRIT AND GROWTH MINDSET

In August 2013, the American Bar Association Commission on Women in the Profession (“Commission”) launched the Grit Project. The Grit Project was created under the leadership of then-Commission Chair Roberta “Bobbi” Liebenberg to educate women lawyers about the science behind grit and growth mindset—two important traits that many successful women lawyers have in common and that have shaped their success. Grit is defined as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals,”¹ whereas a growth mindset is defined as the belief that talent can be developed through dedication and hard work and that perseverance, persistence, and effort eventually pay off.² Grit and growth mindset are known as noncognitive traits—that is, traits that are not based purely on measures of intelligence. Both of these traits have been shown to predict achievement above and beyond traditional measures or predictors of success—such as grade point average (GPA) or class rank—that are heavily relied upon by employers, including legal employers.

The Grit Project provides individual women, bar associations, law firms, law schools, corporate legal departments, government agencies, and other organizations with tools to assess, teach, learn, and understand these traits, ultimately improving the retention and promotion of women lawyers in the profession and enabling women to succeed on their terms. Liebenberg describes in the letter she contributed to this book (included in its entirety in chapter 3):

[M]y vision was to create a comprehensive training program that would teach women lawyers to master these traits, empowering them to navigate everyday challenges

and barriers. The Commission's grit toolkit allows women lawyers to take charge of their careers and dispel the inner voices of doubt everyone has heard, making you think you won't or can't succeed.

Information about the Grit Project and the Grit Project Toolkit and other resources are available online at www.ambar.org/grit and in appendix B of this book.

When it launched, the Grit Project relied on earlier, groundbreaking work. Dr. Angela Duckworth developed the grit construct in 2007 and has continued to study its impact in a number of academic and professional settings. Dr. Carol Dweck has spent her career studying achievement and, along the way, developed, and then extensively explored, the concept of growth mindset. The Grit Project also relied on the work of Dr. Milana Hogan, who researched the specific ways in which grit and a growth mindset impact the success of women in BigLaw (defined for research purposes as the law firms that appear on *The American Lawyer's* annual "Am Law 200" list). In many of these 200 BigLaw firms, one could walk into a room with the senior-most decision makers and find only one woman seated at the table—in some firms, there would be no women at the table at all. This state of affairs is discouraging for the many employers who recognize the significant and convincingly demonstrated benefits—financial and otherwise—associated with having women lawyers in leadership positions.³

The representation of women in BigLaw leadership has led members of the legal profession and academics to study the progression of women's careers to determine why they seem to evolve so differently than the careers of their male counterparts. Some of these studies focus on the obstacles or barriers that prevent women from reaching the most senior positions. Other studies attempt to identify the root causes of this year-over-year failure to reduce the gender gap at the leadership level. Finally, there is a body of literature that looks at women who have achieved a high level of success and seeks to ascertain common characteristics that these successful women share.

This book contributes to the latter collection of research and, in particular, expands on Dr. Hogan's 2013 study. Since the focus of her 2013 research was limited to the impact of grit and growth mindset on women in BigLaw, a group that represents only a small subset of practicing women lawyers, it seemed critically important to explore the ways in which these traits impact the many women working as solo practitioners, in small and mid-size firms, in corporations of all sizes, and in government and nonprofit positions. In other words, the Commission wanted to understand more broadly, and also very specifically, whether and how grit and a growth mindset are, or are not, characteristics common to successful women lawyers everywhere. In 2015, under the leadership of then-Commission Chair Michele Coleman Mayes, the Commission embarked on a second round of research to discover the answers to some of these important questions.

The Grit Project was an immediate success. We realized that the concepts of grit and a growth mindset struck a nerve among women lawyers. Bar associations, law firms, and law schools throughout the country presented programs based upon the materials provided in the Grit Project Toolkit. It was clear that women in environments beyond BigLaw were interested in these principles. We wanted to know more—we needed to know more.

It should be noted that BigLaw is not the only area where gender disparity in leadership is at play. Indeed, this is a much larger and deeper issue: for roughly 30 years, 50 percent of law school graduates have been women (and in 2017 women represented more than half of the incoming law school class), yet only 18 percent of law firm equity partners and 24 percent of general counsel are women.⁴ Although women and men have entered law school in roughly equal numbers, there has been very little movement at the top levels of leadership. It is clear, then, that the significant number of women entering the profession alone has not translated into parity at the top of the organizational chart. Instead, as lawyers ascend the leadership ranks, there is a steady decline in

the number of women occupying positions of authority. By the time women arrive at the most senior leadership levels—those lawyers who hold an ownership interest in their firms or occupy the most prestigious, powerful, and best-paid positions in-house or in government—they represent a mere 18 to 24 percent of the overall population.⁵

As we will share in detail in the coming pages, our latest round of research suggests that grit and a growth mindset are not only traits that many highly successful women lawyers practicing in many different capacities possess, but also that they are valuable tools for women to draw upon when building successful careers in the law. Grit and growth mindset have the potential to help women navigate their way through the (sometimes overwhelming) obstacles—both personal and professional—that may present themselves along the way. Furthermore, this research provides legal employers, bar associations, law schools, and other entities with additional tools to support women in the workplace and to begin to chip away at the gender gap at the leadership level. In other words, our research suggests that there is a path to reach a different, more positive outcome.

HOW THE BOOK IS ORGANIZED

Chapter 1 dives into the Commission's expanded research involving solo practitioners, law firms of all sizes, in-house legal departments, government, and nonprofits. It defines key terms: grit, perseverance, passion, deliberate practice, the grit scale, mindset, and the mindset quiz. The chapter next describes the research process—the survey used to collect data (the quantitative research), as well as interviews and other feedback (the qualitative research)—and concludes with a summary of the key findings of this research effort.

The four chapters that follow focus on specific work environments: solo practitioners (chapter 2), law firm lawyers (chapter 3), in-house lawyers (chapter 4), and government and nonprofit lawyers (chapter 5). Each of these chapters begins with a detailed

summary of the demographics of the women in that group, including the number of women surveyed, practice areas, length of practice, academic performance, family history, ambition levels, and grit and mindset scores. Each chapter also includes a description of the relevant measures of success for those lawyers. The key findings for that group are discussed next, and, last, the chapter contains letters from women lawyers representing that work environment.

In presenting the findings, we draw upon the results of the survey in addition to interviews and quotes from the letters themselves. For the women who have practiced in more than one group (for example, a participant may have started in a BigLaw firm, moved in-house, and then ultimately started her own practice), we have included their letters in the section where they are now, where they spent the greatest amount of time, or where they devoted the greatest amount of real estate in their respective letters.

Following a brief conclusion, appendix A discusses what employers can do to nurture and evaluate grit and to reward and encourage grit in their employees. Appendix B lists grit resources available through the Commission's Grit Project, and for those interested in learning more about the science of grit and growth mindset, appendix C offers a summary of the research on these important traits. This research is not limited to lawyers but instead examines research outside the legal sphere and includes a summary of some of the factors that have been known to impact female professionals across industries.

SUCCESSFUL WOMEN LAWYERS TELL THEIR STORIES

This book goes beyond the quantitative research to offer letters from 47 successful women lawyers. The reader will find real-life examples of the critical role that grit and a growth mindset have played in these women's advancement in the legal profession and in achieving success on their own terms. These letters will inspire, reaffirm, and provide much food for thought.

Notes:

1. Duckworth, A., Peterson, C., Matthews, M., and Kelly, D. 2007. "Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92(6): 1087–1101.
2. Dweck, C. 2006. *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.
3. Cohen, R., and Kornfeld, L. 2006. "Women leaders and the bottom line." *Bloomberg Corporate Law Journal* 1: 55–61.
4. ABA Commission on Women in the Profession. A Current Glance at Women in the Law . . . https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/marketing/women/current_glance_statistics_january2017.pdf. Accessed January 2017.
5. *Id.*