

## Unraveling Human Excellence

About 19,000 years ago, early humans first realized that if they took three separate strands of vine and braided them together, the newly created rope could support more weight than the sum of the three independent strands of vine.

Why is this? Physics tells us that when strands of a rope are braided together, they create a synergistic effect. The carefully braided strands place mutual levels of force on one another, making it possible to support more weight than the combined total of three independent strands.

As an individual that has been fascinated by human achievement, I have begun to wonder whether the factors that promote exceptional human performance function much like rope. For much of my life, for instance, I have continually asked:

- Why do some people, despite having very similar backgrounds and life experiences, go on to experience very different life trajectories?
- Why do some students, despite growing up in the most challenging life situations, go on to achieve remarkable results as adults?
- Why is it some athletes, who go largely unnoticed in their earlier playing days, end up achieving success at the highest echelons of their profession?
- Why is it, despite not having the natural intelligence others enjoy, some individuals rise up the ranks of their organizations to become true transformational leaders?

### The Role of Non-Cognitive Skills

Captivated by this curiosity, I have now spent close to a decade attempting to uncover some answers. After spending years studying high performers in schools, athletics, and leadership, I have come to learn that in addition to having a high IQ and very good human relations skills, another crucial element of high performance includes possessing what are collectively being referred to as non-cognitive skills. These are the set of skills that research is increasingly demonstrating as being crucial to success in numerous life domains - from academic achievement to labor market outcomes to leadership success.

While there has been an explosion of interest in some recent non-cognitive skills such as grit and growth mindset, no single non-cognitive skill alone can be enough to drive human excellence over the course of a lifetime. Instead, a person will experience the highest levels of success when they possess an array of these key non-cognitive skills that work together in a synergistic manner, just like how strands of a rope unite together.

Through our continued research at The Intrinsic Institute, we have crafted together a synthesized model of non-cognitive skills as a way to explain this theory of human excellence. We refer to the model as the *Intrinsic Edge*, as the non-cognitive skills composing the model are factors we all intrinsically possess, and when developed, give individuals the competitive edge to achieve high performance.

The *Intrinsic Edge* model uses a rope as its metaphor to explain how the non-cognitive factors work like separate yarns of a rope woven together, ultimately helping to promote outstanding performance and achievement. With real rope, its strength is measured by its working load – how much weight the rope can hold before it snaps in two. Generally speaking, the thicker the strands are, the more weight it can

support. The same holds true for the *Intrinsic Edge* model, in which it is ideal to have higher scores on each strand of the model.

So what are the three strands of the *Intrinsic Edge* model that work together to promote greatness?

### **Strand #1: Fire**

In studying high performers, a common characteristic shared by these individuals is that they are extremely self-motivated. Rather than needing to be motivated by an authority figure or by some extrinsic motivator such as money, these high achievers possess an ability to be incredibly self-motivated as they work toward their goals with remarkable levels of passion and drive. Stephen Covey once stated, "Motivation is a fire from within. If someone else tries to light that fire under you, chances are it will burn very briefly."

What, then, causes this fire to burn inside so many high-achieving individuals? It comes down to possessing the following:

- 1) **Self-awareness** – possessing an accurate understanding and appreciation of our authentic self
- 2) **Self-determination** – having and pursuing self-generated and very meaningful goals that align with our values and greater sense of purpose
- 3) **Growth mindset** – holding the belief that our potential can be cultivated through effort
- 4) **Self-efficacy** – believing in our ability to accomplish our goals

### **Strand #2: Discipline**

The second strand of the rope involves having discipline. It is one thing to have an internal fire driving high levels of motivation, but it is another to have the discipline to go along with that motivation. We have found that extremely successful individuals are not only driven to accomplish their goals, but they also possess the discipline needed to follow through and finish them.

What non-cognitive factors, then, determine whether a person will have the discipline to accomplish those goals?

- 1) **Grit** – having the passion and perseverance to remain committed to our long-term goals
- 2) **Self-discipline** – possessing the ability to engage in deliberate practice and do work we simply do not want to do
- 3) **Conscientiousness** – being organized, careful, and dependable in the completion of our work
- 4) **Self-control** – maintaining the ability to control our impulses and delay gratification for a larger reward in the future

### **Strand #3: Control**

While it is true that high performers have both incredible motivation and discipline, we have found they also possess a third strand, which we call control. This final strand of the rope involves being able to adapt to changing situations and having the ability to overcome adversity when it strikes. Since the world never stays the same, high performers know how important it is to be able to modify and adapt to

change. Likewise, even those at the pinnacle of their profession experience failure. In the end, the people who continually perform at a high level possess an element of control, which allows them to adjust to the changing world around them and bounce back when life knocks them down. The non-cognitive skills promoting this level of control include the following:

- 1) **Adaptability** – possessing the ability to acclimate to the changing environment
- 2) **Situational Awareness** – being cognizant of our surroundings in order to harness new opportunities when they arise
- 3) **Hope** – possessing the ability to actively pursue our goals while maintaining the ability to navigate around obstacles
- 4) **Resiliency** – having the ability to bounce back from setbacks and emerge from adversity stronger than before

At last, there are three strands making up the *Intrinsic Edge* model. These three strands include having fire, discipline, and control. Although it is likely that these three factors will greatly assist someone in reaching a high level of success, there is one final component necessary for exceptional human performance to occur over the long-term.

#### **A Seal Holding the Strands Intact**

When further examining rope, we notice there is something on the ends of the rope holding the three strands intact. With real rope, there is often either wax or tape that keep the strands bound together. Without this wax or tape, the rope would unravel.

In our model, we recognize that there must be a final essential quality to ensure that greatness created from the three strands persist in the long-term. Thus, there must be a seal keeping the three strands united together. In the *Intrinsic Edge* model, this seal holding the strands of the rope together includes having the following:

- 1) **Honesty** – being truthful and trustworthy
- 2) **Integrity** – doing the right thing, even when no one is watching
- 3) **Ethical behavior** – acting with beneficence (doing good) and nonmaleficence (doing no harm)

We have likely all seen situations of extremely motivated, disciplined, and resilient individuals who also engage in unethical behavior to gain a competitive advantage. In the short-term, cheating and lying can often contribute to a person getting ahead. If this individual continues on this path of unethical behavior, though, we typically see the person's life begin to unravel - just like rope without wax or tape holding the ends together.

Thus, our model proposes that if a person desires to experience long-term success, they not only need the three strands to be extremely self-motivated, disciplined, and resilient, but they also must have the honesty, integrity, and ethical behavior to go along with it. Those final factors keep the three strands intact, allowing a person to experience high levels of success over time.

#### **The Synergistic Effect of Human Excellence**

Human excellence is much like a three-stranded rope, where the three strands composed of various non-cognitive skills work in an interrelated and interdependent manner to promote greatness. Similar to real rope, the more we can build up the three strands so that each is as thick as possible, the more likely we will be able to handle life's challenges and reach our highest levels of potential.

As a person increases the strength of each rope strand, it helps to relieve pressure on the other two strands. In other words, when we become more self-motivated, it makes it easier to persevere. When we increase our discipline and grit, it makes it easier to bounce back from setbacks. When we increase our hope and resiliency, it becomes easier to be more motivated. Just as we see with real rope, there is a synergistic effect that occurs with our non-cognitive skills that promotes positive outcomes.

### **Measuring and Building Greatness**

In conclusion, just as early man figured out 19,000 years ago, something magical happens when we braid together three strands of vine. Our theory is that this same effect occurs with a person's non-cognitive skills, which in turn, drives optimal human performance over the course of a lifespan.

We readily acknowledge that all people possess these skills, and we have been working for years to develop a novel way to measure this model of human excellence and have done so with a revolutionary psychometric tool called The Intrinsic Profile.

Most importantly, whether it be students in the classroom or employees in an organization, there is a growing body of evidence supporting these factors can be cultivated through direct intervention. Through our research, for instance, we have found students increase their non-cognitive skills by an average of 12% through the use of our curriculum. Likewise, initial results from individualized coaching is showing to be another great method of helping students develop these crucial skills. In a similar fashion, adults within organizations can also foster these skills through both coaching and training. In the end, we have consistently found that the individuals who work to cultivate and demonstrate these skills at very high levels - are the ones who go on to achieve greatness.

Olympian Wilma Rudolph once said, "Never underestimate the power of dreams and the influence of the human spirit. We are all the same in this notion. The potential for greatness lives within each of us." Indeed, we could not agree more. The power of the human spirit is what ultimately transforms our world. And it is by developing these skills in our students, cultivating these skills within our organizations, and enriching these skills within our leaders that we will ignite greatness like we have never seen before.

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To learn more about measuring and developing the key non-cognitive skills driving human excellence, please contact The Intrinsic Institute ([info@intrinsicinstitute.com](mailto:info@intrinsicinstitute.com)), visit our website, or follow us on Twitter ([@Intrinsic\\_Inst](https://twitter.com/Intrinsic_Inst)).



**Author:** Dr. Brian Davidson is the founder and president of the Intrinsic Institute, a research, coaching, and consulting firm discovering and building the best in individuals and organizations. The Intrinsic Institute specializes in the measurement, training, and development of non-cognitive skills, the intangible “it” factors such as self-motivation, grit, and resiliency driving greatness. With a mission to ignite the greatness within, the Intrinsic Institute partners with individuals, educational institutions, and businesses across the world to build the non-cognitive skills driving exceptional human performance.