Convene

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY SERIES

THE SUMMARY OF

HIDDEN POTENTIAL

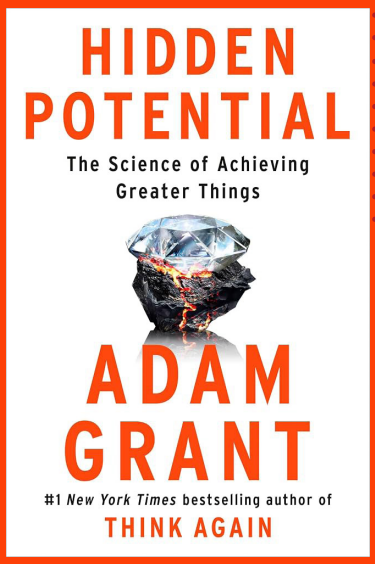
By Adam Grant
Viking 2023

PROLOGUE • GROWING ROSES FROM CONCRETE

Everyone has hidden potential. This book is about how we unlock it. There's a widely held belief that greatness is mostly born—not made. That leads us to celebrate gifted students in school, natural athletes in sports, and child prodigies in music. But you don't have to be a wunderkind to accomplish great things. My goal is to illuminate how we can all rise to achieve greater things.

As an organizational psychologist, I've spent much of my career studying the forces that fuel our progress. What I've learned might challenge some of your fundamental assumptions about the potential in each of us.

In a landmark study, psychologists set out to investigate the roots of exceptional talent among musicians, artists, scientists, and athletes. They were stunned to discover that only a handful of these high achievers had been child prodigies. Most were not identified as having special abilities when young. If they were singled out, it was not for unusual aptitude but unusual motivation. That moti-



ABOUT THE
AUTHOR

Adam Grant is an organizational psychologist at The Wharton School, the author of multiple books, and host of the podcast, Re:Thinking.

Published by Study Leadership, Inc. 1N010 Prairie Path Lane, Winfield, IL 60190. No part of this document may be reproduced without prior written consent.

© 2025 Study Leadership, Inc. All rights reserved

vation wasn't innate; it tended to begin with a coach or teacher who made learning fun. "What any person in the world can learn, almost all persons can learn," the lead psychologist concluded. "If provided with appropriate . . . conditions of learning."

Recent evidence underscores the importance of conditions for learning. To master a new concept in math, science, or a foreign language, it typically takes seven or eight practice sessions. That number of reps held across thousands of students, from elementary school all the way through college.

Of course, there were students who excelled after fewer practice sessions. But they weren't faster learners—they improved at the same rate as their peers. What set them apart was that they showed up to the first practice session with more initial knowledge. What look like differences in natural ability are often differences in opportunity and motivation.

High achievers vary dramatically in their initial aptitudes. You can't tell where people will land from where they begin. With the right opportunity and motivation to learn, anyone can build the skills to achieve greater things. Potential is not a matter of where you start, but of how far you travel. We need to focus less on starting points and more on distance traveled.

People who make major strides are rarely freaks of nature. They're usually freaks of nurture. Neglecting the impact of nurture has dire consequences. It leads us to underestimate the amount of ground that can be gained and the range of talents that can be learned. As a result, we limit ourselves and the people around us. We deprive the world of greater things.

Stretching beyond our strengths is how we reach our potential and perform at our peak. This book is not about ambition (the outcome you want to attain). It's about aspiration (the person you hope to become). What counts is not how hard you work but how much you grow. And growth requires much more than a mindset—it begins with a set of skills that we normally overlook.

When Aristotle wrote about qualities like being disciplined and prosocial, he called them virtues of character, acquired and enacted through sheer force of will—a commitment to a clear moral code. I now see character less as a matter of will, but more as a set of skills. Character is more than just having principles. It's a learned capacity to live by your principles.

Helping children and students reach their full potential requires a focused, transient form of support that prepares them to direct their own learning and growth. Psychologists call it scaffolding. A teacher or coach offers initial instruction and then removes their support. The goal is to shift the responsibility to you so you can develop your own independent approach to learning.

When we admire great thinkers, doers, and leaders, we often focus narrowly on their performance. That leads us to elevate the people who have accomplished the most and overlook the ones who have achieved the most with the least. The true measure of your potential is not the height of the peak you've reached, but how far you've climbed to get there.

SECTION I • SKILLS OF CHARACTER: GETTING BETTER AT GETTING BETTER

Recently a team of social scientists launched an experiment with 1,500 entrepreneurs in West Africa running small startups in manufacturing, service, and commerce. They randomly assigned the founders to one of three groups. The control group went about business as usual. The other two were training groups that spent one week learning new concepts. One group took an accredited business course by the International Finance Corporation and studied finance, accounting, HR, marketing, and pricing, and practiced using what they learned to solve challenges and seize opportunities. The other group studied matters of character: personal initiative, proactivity, discipline, and determination, and practiced putting those qualities into action.

Character skills training had a dramatic impact. Those firms' profits grew by an average of 30 percent over the next two years. That was nearly triple the benefit of training in cognitive skills. Finance and marketing knowledge might have equipped founders to capitalize on opportunities, but studying proactivity and discipline enable them to generate opportunities. They learned to anticipate market changes rather than react to them. They developed more creative ideas and introduced more new products. When they encountered obstacles, instead of giving up, they were more resilient and resourceful. Along with demonstrating that character skills can propel us to achieve greater things, this evidence reveals that it's never too late to build them.

Character is often confused with personality, but they're not the same. Personality is your predisposition—your basic instincts for how to think, feel, and act. Character is your capacity to prioritize your values over your instincts.

Knowing your principles doesn't necessarily mean you know how to practice them, particularly under stress or pressure. It's easy to be proactive and determined when things are going well. The true test of character is whether you manage to stand by those values when the deck is stacked against you. If personality is how you respond on a typical day, character is how you show up on a hard day. Personality is not your destiny—it's your tendency. Character skills enable you to transcend that tendency to be true to your principles. It's not about the traits you have—it's what you decide to do with them. Wherever you are today, there's no reason why you can't grow your character skills starting now.

Chapter 1 • CREATURES OF DISCOMFORT: Embracing the Unbearable Awkwardness of Learning

There's a popular practice in schools that has dissuaded many learners from seeking discomfort. It arose as a well-intentioned solution to a pervasive problem in the American education system. For decades, many schools were run like assembly lines in a factory. Students were treated as interchangeable parts in the mass production of young minds. Despite having different strengths, they were stuck absorbing uniform knowledge through the same standardized lessons and lectures.

Today, "learning styles" are a foundational element of teacher training and student experience. Around the world, 89 percent of teachers believe in matching their instruction to student's learning styles. There's just one small problem with learning styles. They're a

myth. Researchers have found a "lack of credible evidence" to justify the learning-styles approach, which they deemed "striking and disturbing."

What we know now is that your preference isn't fixed, and playing only to your strengths deprives you of the opportunity to improve on your weaknesses. The way you like to learn is what makes you comfortable, but it isn't necessarily how you learn best. Sometimes you even learn better in the mode that makes you the most uncomfortable, because you have to work harder at it. This is the first form of courage: being brave enough to embrace discomfort and throw your learning style out the window.

The second form of courage is being brave enough to use your knowledge as you acquire it. The third is not just embracing and seeking discomfort, but amplifying it by being brave enough to make more mistakes. If we wait until we feel ready to take on a new challenge, we might never pursue it at all. There may not come a day when we wake up and suddenly feel prepared. We become prepared by taking the leap anyway.

Chapter 2 • HUMAN SPONGES: Building the Capacity to Absorb and Adapt

When you think of a sea sponge, you're probably picturing a creature that's like a kitchen sponge—it soaks up everything around it. But sea sponges don't just passively absorb food and oxygen. They're adept at filtering out toxic substances and unhealthy particles. This capacity to absorb, filter, and adapt enables sponges to grow and thrive. And it's a capacity that matters a great deal for humans, too.

Being a sponge is more than a metaphor. It's a character skill—a form of proactivity that's vital to realizing hidden potential. Improving depends not on the quantity of information you seek out, but the quality of the information you take in. Growth is less about how hard you work than how well you learn.

Instead of seeking feedback, you're better off asking for advice. Feedback tends to focus on how well you did last time. Advice shifts attention to how you can do better next time. Rather than dwelling on what you did wrong, advice guides you toward what you can do right.

The key to being a sponge is determining what information to absorb versus what to filter out. It's a question of which coaches to trust. I like to break trustworthiness down to three components: care (wants what's best for you), credibility (has relevant expertise), and familiarity (knows you well).

Being a sponge is not only a proactive skill—it's a prosocial skill. Done right, it's not just about soaking up nutrients that help us grow. It's also about releasing nutrients to help others grow..

Chapter 3 • THE IMPERFECTIONISTS: Finding the Sweet Spot between Flawed and Flawless

Extensive evidence shows that it's having high personal standards, not pursuing perfection, that fuels growth. Finding beauty in your imperfection is often easier said than done. As a recovering perfectionist, I know from experience.

In their quest for flawless results, research suggests that perfectionists tend to get three things wrong. One: they obsess about details that don't matter. They're so busy finding the right solution to tiny problems that they lack the discipline to find the right problems to solve. They can't see the forest for the trees. Two: they avoid unfamiliar situations and difficult tasks that might lead to failure. That leaves them refining a narrow set of existing skills rather

than working to develop new ones. Three: they berate themselves for making mistakes which makes it harder to learn from them. They fail to realize that the purpose of reviewing your mistakes isn't to shame your past self. It's to educate your future self.

Ultimately, excellence is more than meeting other people's expectations. It's about living up to your own standards. After all, it's impossible to please everyone. The question is whether you're letting down the right people. It's better to disappoint others than to disappoint yourself.

SECTION I • STRUCTURES FOR MOTIVATION: SCAFFOLDING TO OVERCOME OBSTACLES

On the path to any goal, roadblocks are inevitable. When we run into external barriers, they often take an internal toll—burn out, stagnation, failure, dejection, and doubt.

Scaffolding has four key features. It generally comes from other people. It is tailored to the obstacle in your path. It comes at a pivotal point in time. And it is temporary.

Scaffolding unleashes hidden potential by helping us forge paths we couldn't otherwise see. It enables us to find motivation in the daily grind, gain momentum in the face of stagnation, and turn difficulties and doubts into sources of strength.

Chapter 4 • TRANSFORMING TO DAILY GRIND: Infusing Passion into Practice

If you want to become an expert in any field, it's not enough to be a freak of nature. No one is born with an innate ability to play "Amazing Grace" on the bagpipes, pull a bubbling Baked Alaska out of the oven, juggle seven balls at a time, or even spell words like onomatopoeia and mayonnaise. It takes practice to master a skill.

Ever since the notion of achieving mastery through 10,000 hours of practice took the world by storm, coaches, parents, and teachers have been fascinated by a particular kind of practice. Deliberate practice is the structured repetition of a task to improve performance based on clear goals and immediate feedback. How much of that you need, however, is more nuanced than the 10,000 hours idea would have us believe.

Research reveals that the actual number of hours required for excellence varies dramatically by person and activity. What's clear is that deliberate practice is particularly valuable for improving skills in predictable tasks with consistent moves—swinging a golf club, solving a Rubik's Cube, or playing a violin.

The downside of competing against others is that you can win without improving. They might have a bad day, or you might benefit from a stroke of good luck. You're not aiming for perfect—you're shooting for better. The only way to win is to grow.

The question is how to build the scaffolding to bring a passion into practice. My favorite answer is called deliberate play. Deliberate play is a structured activity that's designed to make skill development enjoyable. It blends elements of deliberate practice and free play. Like free play, deliberate play is fun, but it's structured for learning and mastery along with recreation. It's built to break complex tasks into simpler parts so you can hone a specific skill.

Chapter 5 • GETTING UNSTUCK: The Roundabout Path to Forward Progress

Skills don't grow at a steady pace. Improving them is like driving up a mountain. As we climb higher and higher, the road gets steeper and steeper, and our gains get smaller and smaller. When we run out of momentum, we start to stall. It's not enough to step on the gas—our wheels are spinning, but we've stopped moving.

When I ask people what it takes to achieve greater things, one of the most common answers is that you need to be laser focused and single-minded in your dedication. You need to double down and block out anything that threatens to drain your energy or divide your attention. If you want to excel at your job, spend more time at work: get in early, go home late. Put your hobbies on the back burner . . . and definitely don't take on a side hustle. You don't want to wind up distracted and exhausted.

But the evidence tells a different story. A digression doesn't have to be a diversion. It can be a source of energy. In one study, the motivation benefits of a side hustle or a hobby outweighed any distraction costs. Of all the factors that have been studied, the strongest known force in daily motivation is a sense of progress. You can't always find motivation by staring harder at the thing that isn't working. Sometimes you can build momentum by taking a detour to a new destination.

A detour is a route off your main road that you take to refuel. You're not taking a break; you're not sitting still, idling. You're temporarily veering off course, but you're still in motion. You're advancing toward a different goal.

When you get struck on your way up a mountain, it's better to shift into reverse than to stand still. As you take U-turns and detours, you'll feel as if you're going in circles. In the short run, loops lead to the highest peaks.

Progress is rarely noticeable at a snapshot in time—it unfolds over extended periods of time. If you focus your attention on a specific difficult moment, it's easy to feel stuck. It's only when you look at your trajectory over the course of weeks, months, or years that you appreciate the distance you've traveled.

Chapter 6 • DEFYING GRAVITY: The Art of Flying by Our Bootstraps

Making progress isn't always about moving forward. Sometimes it's about bouncing back. Progress is not only reflected in the peaks you reach—it's also visible in the valleys you cross. Resilience is a form of growth.

When we're facing a daunting task, we need both competence and confidence. Our ability to elevate our skills and our expectations depends first on how we interpret the obstacles in front of us. Extensive evidence shows that when we view hurdles as threats, we tend to back down and give up. When we treat barriers as challenges to conquer, we rise to the occasion.

Seeing obstacles as challenges depends partly on having a growth mindset—believing in your ability to improve. But a growth mindset alone does little good without scaffolding to support it. If we aren't lucky enough to have others hand us that scaffolding, we may have to assemble it ourselves. That's where bootstrapping comes in. Bootstrapping is using your existing resources to pull yourself out of a sticky situation.

Bootstrapping is normally seen as an individual skill. You don't rely on assistance from others. You pull at the loop at the back of your own boots to lift yourself over obstacles. It sounds like an expression of rug-

ged individualism—an independent act. But it is when we approach it interdependently that we gain the competence and the confidence to overcome obstacles.

Considerable evidence shows that studying with knowledgeable colleagues is good for growth. This is often called the tutor effect, when we learn through sharing the very knowledge that we want to acquire. Teaching others can build our competence. But it's coaching others that elevates our confidence. When we encourage others to overcome obstacles, it can help us find our own motivation.

SECTION III • SYSTEMS OF OPPORTUNITY: OPENING DOORS AND WINDOWS

Character skills and scaffolding can help us unlock hidden potential in ourselves and those around us. But to give more people the chance to achieve greater things, we need something bigger. Creating opportunities on a larger scale requires us to build better systems in our schools, teams, and organizations.

Good systems provide the opportunity for people to travel great distances. They open doors for people who don't grow up with means, offer windows to those who get turned away at the door, and shatter glass ceilings for those who are all too often denied a shot to break through.

When we design and build systems to unleash the hidden potential in populations, admissions and hiring systems can recognize the potential in late bloomers and long shots. Teams and organizational systems can recognize that good ideas don't flow only from the top down and fill the silence with voices from the bottom up. And school systems can give kids who start out behind a fighting chance to get ahead. Instead of only looking for geniuses where we expect to find them, we can reach humanity's greatest potential by cultivating the genius in everyone.

Chapter 7 • EVERY CHILD GETS AHEAD: Designing Schools to Bring Out the Best in Students

In 2000, students from dozens of countries took the PISA—a standardized test of their math, reading, and science skills to directly compare the aptitudes of young people around the world. When the results came in, people were stunned—the winner was the unheralded underdog country of Finland.

America's schools had a lot to learn from Finland's extraordinary leap. In search of the recipe behind the secret sauce, I went to Finland and spoke with a range of educational experts and combed through extensive research. It soon became clear that Finland didn't have one magic ingredient. In fact, their best ingredients can work anywhere—and there are adjustments we can make to improve them. Based on studying what Finland does differently, I believe much of their success stems from the culture they've created.

Their culture is rooted in a belief in the potential of all students. Instead of singling out the best and the brightest, Finnish schools are designed to give every

student the opportunity to grow. On the PISA, their achievement gaps between schools and between students were the smallest in the world. Being disadvantaged was less of a disadvantage in Finland than anywhere else: along with the highest rate of high performers, they had the lowest rate of low performers.

In Finnish schools, a popular mantra is "We can't afford to waste a brain." This ethos makes their educational culture distinct. They know that the key to nurturing hidden potential is not to invest in students who show early signs of high ability. It's to invest in every student regardless of apparent ability.

Chapter 8 • MINING FOR GOLD: Unearthing Collective Intelligence in Teams

When we face complex and pressing problems, we know we can't solve them alone. We assume our most important decision is to assemble the most knowledgeable people. Once we've found the right experts, we put our future in their hands.

But that's not what the leaders of the Chilean mine rescue did in August 2010 when 33 men were sealed underground by 700,000 tons of rock. Instead of merely relying on an exclusive group of established experts, they built a system to bring a broader and deeper pool of ideas and intelligence to the surface. When they made their first voice contact with the minors, it was thanks to a $10 innovation from a small-time entrepreneur. The eventual rescue was made possible by a series of suggestions from a 24-year-old engineer who wasn't even part of the core team.

Maximizing group intelligence is about more than enlisting individual experts—and it involves more than merely bringing people together to solve a problem. Unlocking the hidden potential in groups requires leadership practices, team processes, and systems that harness the capabilities and contributions of all their members. The best teams aren't the ones with the best thinkers. They're the teams that unearth and use the best thinking from everyone.

Leaders play an important role in establishing cohesion. But when we select leaders, we don't usually pick the person with the strongest leadership skills. We frequently choose the person who talks the most. It's called the babble effect. Research shows that groups promote the people who command the most airtime—regardless of their aptitude and expertise. We mistake confidence for competence, certainty for credibility, and quantity for quality. We get stuck following people who dominate the discussion instead of those who elevate it. And the worst babblers are the ball hogs.

Research demonstrates that when organizations have cultures that prize relationships above results, if they have a leader who puts people first, they actually achieve greater performance gains. When teams are proactive (not relatively reactive) bringing many ideas and suggestions to the table, it was introverts and not extroverts who led them to achieve greater things. With a team of sponges, the best leader is not the person who talks the most, but the one who listens best.

If we listen only to the smartest person in the room, we miss out on discovering the smarts that the rest of the room has to offer. Our greatest potential isn't always hidden inside us—sometimes it sparks between us, and sometimes it comes from outside our team altogether.

Chapter 9 • DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH: Discovering Uncut Gems in Job Interviews and College Admissions

It's a mistake to judge people solely by the heights they've reached. By favoring applicants who have already excelled, selection systems underestimate and overlook candidates who are capable of greater things. When we confuse past performance with future potential, we miss out on people whose achievements have involved overcoming major obstacles. We need to consider how steep their slope was, how far they've climbed, and how they've grown along the way. The test of a diamond in the rough is not whether it shines from the start, but how it responds to heat or pressure.

Today, opening doors for anyone qualified is a high priority for universities and employers. In principle, application processes invite people from a wide range of backgrounds to show what they're capable of. But in practice, our systems for judging qualifications are flawed.

In schools and workplaces, selection systems are usually designed to detect excellence. That means people who are on their way to excellence rarely make the cut. We don't pay enough attention to these people and their paths—which are often filled with speed bumps and roadblocks. When we fail to see hidden potential, along with shattering people's dreams, we lose out on their contributions.

To decide which candidates to advance to the next round, many employers look to prior performance. Compared to credentials and prior work experience, this is a better clue to potential. How well someone has performed in the past can give us a sense of their ability in the present. But this metric also has drawbacks that lead us to overlook the potential in too many people. Past performance is only helpful if the new job requires similar skills to the old one. This can also lead to the phenomenon known as the Peter Principle as people advance until they get trapped in a new role beyond their abilities.

If natural talent determines where people start, learned character affects how far they go. But character skills aren't always immediately apparent. If we don't look beyond the surface, we risk missing the potential for brilliance underneath.

EPILOGUE • GOING THE DISTANCE

When I started telling people I was writing a book on potential, I kept getting questions about dreams. Is it about reaching our dreams? Are you going to encourage readers to dream big? I didn't want to go there. It all sounded too Pollyanna, too juvenile. It's the sort of lofty language peddled by our self-help gurus, not studied by serious social scientists.

If you have the vision, gravitas, and moral high ground of Martin Luther King Jr., you might get away with it. Though even King's advisors feared the dream language would sound "hackneyed and trite." For the rest of us, I figured dreams were best left behind us in childhood.

Then I came across new evidence that people with bigger dreams go on to achieve greater things. When economists tracked thousands of people from birth until age 55, the aspirations they formed as adolescents foreshadowed how their adult lives would unfold. Young people with grander dreams went further in school and climbed higher at work.

Even after accounting for a host of other factors—their cognitive skills, character skills, family income, and parent's education, occupations, and aspirations—their own dreams made a unique contribution to how they progressed and who they became.

One of my mentors reached out to tell me he was starting his next book and invited me to coauthor it with him. I told some of my students how honored and excited I was that he was bringing me on board. They revolted. If you're going to write a book, start with your own ideas! Have you forgotten what you taught us? The worst kind of success is achieving other people's goals. Don't live someone else's dream. They were right. I decided to pursue a book of my own.

A growth mindset says, "I don't know what I'm doing yet. It's only a matter of time before I figure it out." Scaffolding gives the support they need to figure it out

But the impostor syndrome says, "I don't know what I'm doing. It's only a matter of time until everyone finds out."

Not long ago, it dawned on me that imposter syndrome is a paradox.

- Others believe in you
- You don't believe in yourself
- Yet you believe yourself instead of them

If you doubt yourself, shouldn't you also doubt your low opinion of yourself?

I now believe that imposter syndrome is a sign of hidden potential. It feels like other people are overestimating you, but it's more likely that you're underestimating yourself. They've recognized a capacity for growth that you can't see yet. When multiple people believe in you, it might be time to believe them.

Many people dream of achieving goals. They measure their progress by the status they acquire and the accolades they collect. But the gains that count the most are the hardest to count. The most meaningful growth is not building our careers—it's building our character.

Success is more than reaching our goals—it's living out our values. There's no higher value than aspiring to be better tomorrow than we are today. There's no greater accomplishment than unleashing our hidden potential.

Actions for Impact

The learning process isn't finished when we acquire knowledge. It's complete when we consistently apply that knowledge. Here are my top forty practical takeaways for unlocking hidden potential and achieving greater things.

1. Unleash hidden potential through character skills.
2. Don't be afraid to try a new style.
3. Use it or never gain it at all.
4. Seek discomfort.
5. Set a mistake budget.
6. Increase your absorptive capacity.
7. Ask for advice, not feedback.
8. Figure out which sources to trust.
9. Be the coach you hope to have.
10. Strive for excellence, not perfection.
11. Enlist judges to gauge your progress.
12. Be your own last judge.
13. Engage in mental time travel.
14. Look outward for the right support at the right time.
15. Turn the daily grind into a source of daily joy.
16. Compete against yourself.
17. Don't hold yourself hostage to a fixed routine.

18. Be proactive about rest and recovery.
19. When you're stuck, back up to move forward.
20. Find a compass.
21. Seek multiple guides.
22. Find a side gig.
23. Teach what you want to learn.
24. Build confidence by coaching others.
25. Harness both high and low expectations as motivation.
26. Be a good ancestor.
27. Open doors for people who are underrated and overlooked.
28. Don't waste a brain.
29. Professionalize education.
30. Keep students with the same teachers for multiple years.
31. Give students freedom to explore and share their individual interests.
32. Transfer groups into teams.
33. Choose leaders based on prosocial skills.
34. Shift from brainstorming to brain-writing.
35. Replace the corporate ladder with a lattice system.
36. Eliminate requirements for credentials and experience.
37. Account for degree of difficulty.
38. Use trajectories in evaluations.
39. Reimagine interviews to set candidates up to succeed.
40. Redefine success.