

What is success? – coaching feature



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Coaches for senior executives are often asked one of two things:

1. Help me become even more successful
2. Enable me to start to enjoy the huge success I am achieving

The study of high performers suggests that those people who have a strong sense of personal mission are more motivated and more successful than other people who have similar capabilities. In addition they have a greater sense of meaning in life and therefore likely to be more happy.

The Meanings of Success

What do we mean by 'personal success' within the context of work? At one time, success stories were easy to recognise. The standard plots revolved around career progression, climbing organisational ladders and achieving top jobs with big salaries. For a minority, success meant fame and fortune. Nowadays, there are potentially many more plots to recognise and a generally more complicated situation.

Part of the explanation lies in changing realities. Delaying and downsizing have left many organisational ladders with fewer rungs. The pace of technological change, the rise of home-based, part-time and self-employment and the demise of job-for-life prospects are making the concept of career progression problematic. In today's employment world, success stories may centre less on job advancement than on the acquisition of new skills through lateral deployment (gaining experience of many departments for example), remaining an employable 'freelance' or the effective management of serial or concurrent 'careers'.

For more and more of us, the qualities that would have got us promotion in the past may not be those we most need to succeed in today's environment. The latter include resourcefulness, the capacity to spot or make opportunities, flexibility, rapport and a commitment to lifelong learning. We must look for other explanations of the changing meanings of personal success.

'Success' has become a subject of serious study. Some of the world's leading gurus (Anthony Robbins, Stephen Covey, Brian Tracy etc.) have studied the literature of success to distil its essential principles. Other authorities offer a critical perspective on success as it is conventionally defined. In *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1992), Covey suggests that over the last 50 years 'success' has come to mean the superficial use of quick fix techniques for influence and communication which are not integrated within our characters. Susan Jeffers attacks success from a different perspective. Her main contention is that success defined largely in terms of material and promotional achievements is unlikely to give us joy. 'It's becoming clear', she writes in *End The Struggle And Dance With Life* (1996), 'that the ladder of success is becoming the ladder to distress'.

Although writers and presenters differ on some aspects of success, generally it is possible to discern the emergence of what might be called the new paradigm of success.

1. Success criteria are self-determined. In *Born to Succeed* (1994), Colin Turner defines success as 'the continuous accomplishment of planned objectives which are worthwhile to the individual' (my emphasis). The root belief here is that each of us is responsible for our own life and development, including our salvation at work. It follows from this that each of us must decide what will count as success for us. The judgements of other people are secondary.
2. Success is self-referenced. This means that we shouldn't judge our success by comparing ourselves to other people. Rather, we should judge what we do in relation to what we set out to do or have the potential to do.
3. Success must be viewed holistically. Suppose, as a manager, I achieve success through developing my mental powers but I neglect my emotional development or I lose contact with my physical body. Have I really been successful? Some authorities would say no. They'd argue that our mind, emotions, body and possibly spirit are interrelated and all need nourishment. From this point of view, (over-) specialisation can be hazardous whilst whole person success comes from a broad and balanced pattern of development.
4. Success has to be viewed ecologically. Is a company successful if it achieves its business objectives at the cost of wholesale environmental pollution or swingeing redundancies? The same kind of question has to be asked of individuals. We may enjoy success in one area of our life, but what if it impacts negatively on other areas? What if I'm effective as a manager but, because of the energy it saps, lousy as a partner and parent? The view of many authorities is that we should subject every apparent success to an ecology test before we can afford to take comfort in it.
5. Success needs to be in line with our key values. Some of us climb the ladder of success only to find it leaning against the 'wrong' wall. This happens when we lose contact with our primary values or when we pursue goals that are attached to values that are no longer vital for us. We are not always consciously aware what we do really want. We may think it's material success when 'really' it's happy relationships or adventure. Our feelings should tell us. If we don't really enjoy our apparent successes, then something isn't right.

6. The journey to success is at least as important as the destination. This is a caution against being exclusively end-focused. We miss out on so much of life when goal accomplishment becomes our only concern.

A friend of ours takes his sons to summer football skills camps run by ex professional footballers. The idea of the camp is to develop a range of skills so that it will aid the young (aged 6-14) boys and girls in their future development within the game. Throughout the week they practice and learn different techniques and on the final afternoon they play a game to enable them to put their new learning into practice. All parents are encouraged to attend the final session before taking their children home. As a consultant who works away from home a lot, our friend had to rush back from Manchester where he had been working to Surrey to pick up his boys.

He turned up at the pitch just before half time and the first thing he asked was "what is the score?". His sons' team was losing one nil. The stress and anxiety on the faces of the parents was amazing, especially with 5 minutes remaining and the losing side hit the post. The amount of shouting - sorry I mean encouragement - was at fever pitch when the final whistle went.

On the 15 minute car journey home, our friend sat there listening to his sons talking about the game and how they should have won, it was a penalty and if only the ball had not hit the post. They were totally focused on the outcome, the result and totally missed the real aim of the summer school.

7. Success applies to the ordinary as well as to the extraordinary. Part of the re-evaluation of success is a new respect for the commonplace. If we give one-third of our lives to maintenance activities (washing, eating, shopping, decorating etc.), then it should matter how we approach such routine experiences. For Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi, success is a capacity for 'relishing the moment' and getting completely involved in whatever we are doing. He calls it 'flow' (Living with Flow, 1994). If we are able fully to live everyday experiences, find in them small opportunities for, say, love, happiness, growth or enjoyment, perhaps we have as much right to consider ourselves successful as does the person whose achievements are major but flat.
8. Success has more to do with attitude than with aptitude. This has long been a truism for many PD authorities (Napoleon Hill, for example), but now enjoys general support. We don't have to be especially talented to be successful. Nor does being talented guarantee success. What we do need is to develop what Authority Robbins in *Awaken the Giant Within* (1992) calls a sense of certainty about whatever it is we wish to do or become. This is not to deny the link between success and intelligence. It's just that few if any of us lacks the intelligence(s) to achieve success.

9. Success is replicable. If other people can do a certain thing successfully, then in theory we ought to be able to achieve the same results if we model ourselves on them. Successful modelling usually means knowing exactly what a successful person does inside their mind and body as well as outside it.
10. Success depends on failure. Some contemporary PD authorities do not accept the notion of failure. They say failure is always information or feedback that can help us to be more successful next time. Hence, success and failure are not opposites. To succeed, it is often necessary to have 'failed' first. And not to fail may be a (bad) sign of not taking enough risks with and in our lives. There is much in the emerging paradigm of success for leaders to take comfort in and inspiration from.
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