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What do Executives want out of Life?

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by

Manfred F.R. Kets De Vries*

* The Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Clinical Professor of Leadership Development,
Director, INSEAD Global Leadership Center (IGLC), INSEAD, France and Singapore.
Ph: +33 1 60 72 41 55, Email: manfred.kets.de.vries@insead.edu

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Abstract

This article is based on the responses of 160 senior executives to questions of what success means to them. Eight major categories of success emerged: family, wealth, work/career, recognition/fame, power, winning/overcoming challenges, friendships, and meaning. Experiences of success depended on “intrinsic” or “external” validation, and the inner scripts that these executives had developed while growing up, which influenced their perceptions of success and how they experienced it. The qualities of *focus*, *persistence*, and *self-mastery*, among others, featured in the scripts of many successful people. The darker side of success was partly accounted for by what can be described as the “Faust Syndrome,” the melancholia that follows the sense of everything being completed. What the narratives for most of these executives illustrate, is that success is a journey, not a destination.

“No one can cheat you out of ultimate success but yourself.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Money may be the husk of many things, but not the kernel. It brings you food, but not appetite; medicine, but not health; acquaintances, but not friends; servants, but not faithfulness; days of joy, but not peace or happiness.”

—Henrik Ibsen

“We never know, believe me, when we have succeeded best.”

—Miguel de Unamuno

“Eighty percent of success is showing up.”

—Woody Allen

Introduction

Getting leaders together in an environment that emphasizes trust, cooperation, and constructive feedback leads to some lively discussions, not least when I ask them what they want out of life. The instant response is, “To be successful.” When I press them about what success actually means to them, the variety of replies demonstrates that success is a metaphor for many things, made up of different combinations of patterns, values, and ideas. The most common answer to my question is, “Having a good job and making money.” But further probing produces richer responses. When I get leaders to really talk, I discover that there are no known algorithms to determine success; it is not quantifiable. To complicate matters, success has a downside of which some are all too painfully aware.

For this research project, 160 senior executives were interviewed in a semi-structured way, both individually and in a group context. Many of the respondents were participating in one of two very long seminars given at INSEAD: *The Challenge of Leadership: Creating Reflective Leaders* for top executives, or the *Consulting and Coaching for Change* program designed for consultants, HR professionals, and executives. Both of these two programs contain a strong dose of dynamic

psychotherapy, giving participants an in-depth understanding of psychological processes, and helping them to be better prepared to deal with complex human situations in organizations.

Methodology

To arrive at responses to what success meant to these executives a number of questions were asked in a semi-structured way. Among the question asked were:

- What do you want out of life?
- What does success actually mean to you?
- Do you have an idea where this desire to be successful comes from?
- List what you perceive as important to feeling successful in order of priority?
- What do you need to do in order to be successful?
- Do you feel that you have to pay a price in order to be successful?
- What would you be willing to give up to pursue what you have defined as success?
- How far are you prepared to go to acquire wealth?
- Would you be prepared to do things you hate in order to make tons of money?
- Would you be prepared to sacrifice your health, your principles in order to be successful?
- Do you need an audience to recognize your success?
- What would that audience be?
- What would you do in life if you couldn't fail?

The benefit of such programs to leaders lies in the words carved over two thousand years ago in the Temple to Apollo at Delphi—"Know thyself." If we can understand what motivates and drives ourselves, we can find ways not only to improve our own performance, but also to improve the performance of our organizations. In order to do so, we have to look at the various definitions of success and then relate them back to our own felt experience. We have to understand how our feelings of success are validated, both internally and externally. We also have to understand the scripts that play out in our inner theater and determine how we perceive and experience success.

Once armed with this information, we can apply techniques to ensure that the success we seek is indeed our true north, and bring others along for the ride.

Defining success

Success touches us all, from the lowliest worker to the most elevated executive. For most of us, it is a highly emotional experience. It gives us highs, but it can also bring us lows. And for many of us, our definition of success is what gives us a bearing on life; it points to where we should be heading. Our perception of success influences the way we measure our days and desires.

So what is success? Let's look at two very different and very successful people: the Russian oligarch billionaire, Roman Abramowitz, and the Nobel Prize winning human rights and environmental activist, Professor Wangari Muta Maathai. Abramowitz is one of the wealthiest people in the world, but his success is not only financial; he is also successful in politics and sport. He is (albeit reluctantly) the governor of Chukotka, the most northeasterly region of Russia, a member of the Duma, and the owner of Chelsea football club, one of the top teams in the UK.

In 2004, professor Maathai became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, for "her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace." She founded the Green Belt Movement, a grassroots environmental non-governmental organization, which has planted over 40 million trees across Kenya to prevent soil erosion. She is known affectionately as the "Tree Woman" and "The Tree Mother of Africa." Professor Maathai has also become increasingly active on women's issues. Her unique forms of action have helped to draw attention to political oppression, nationally and internationally. She has inspired many in the fight for democratic rights and encouraged women to better their situation.

While we think of both Abramowitz and Maathai as successful, one is all about money, the other all about meaning. Their very different achievements suggest the difficulty of defining success. In this context, just think of an athlete, a homemaker, a

surgeon, or an actor. One person's idea of success will mean very little to someone else.

What complicates the success equation further is that what we perceive as success at one stage of our lives may no longer be relevant at another. Success is a very fluid concept. It is of a protean nature. But whatever its meaning, success makes the world go round. It helps give life a purpose. A sense of purpose is important to all of us. Hasn't it been said that the purpose of life is a life of purpose?

Many of the 160 executives I interviewed said that they wanted their lives to be extraordinary rather than merely ordinary. But closer inspection revealed that "extraordinary" meant being successful, and did not get us any nearer to a definition of success. So I asked them to list what they felt was important to their feelings of being successful, in order of priority. The major indicators of success that emerged from this exercise were, in order of the frequency with which they were mentioned, family, wealth, work/career, recognition/fame, power, winning/overcoming challenges, friendships, and meaning.

Family

The most frequently cited marker of success was family, despite the fact that many of the respondents could be described as workaholics. Success was described as having a good relationship with the family, rather than wealth, possessions, or career, notwithstanding how others perceived their success. To these respondents, happiness was not something that could be bought with money.

"Success is being a good dad to my two kids, and seeing them becoming responsible adults," said the COO of a technology company. "Also, I want to give them the things I didn't have when I was a child." This idea was cited on numerous occasions: many of the executives I interviewed described growing up in dysfunctional families and being determined that their own children would have a different environment. They wanted their children to be happy.

But not every person who grows up in a dysfunctional household becomes a successful executive. The importance of family to these respondents was informed by

the values and beliefs that determined how they treated the people closest to them, and thus by the choices they had made in the light of their own experiences. Where success was defined as having contributed to the creation of a close-knit family, we can see that those who did not grow up in such a family made conscious decisions to do things differently.

”My own professional ambitions have to take a back seat,” the COO said. “To me, the highest priority is to remain connected to the family.”

Wealth

Acquiring wealth was the second most popular indicator of success. To a large number of the respondents, financial security was a priority—and had very much determined (and was determining) the life trajectory they were on. This definition of success translated as the pursuit of money, securing finances, and having minimal debt. One CEO in the sports wear business commented, “Money was short when I was growing up. My parents were very preoccupied with their lack of money. By the time I was seven years old, I had decided that I didn’t want to be in the same situation as them.”

It is not surprising that success means financial security to those who grew up with little, but achieving their goal could be a hollow victory, as the CEO pointed out. “It will take me several lifetimes to spend all the money I’ve made. But ironically, instead of having greater peace of mind, I am more driven than ever. I don’t compare myself to my parents now, but to other wealthy people, and I want to have more than them. Money has become my way of keeping score. It’s a blessing and a prison sentence.”

As this statement indicates, many of the executives who equated success with money also felt ambivalent about its pursuit, because this type of success often came at a price. I asked how far the respondents were prepared to go to acquire wealth. What would they be willing to give up in order to pursue what they defined as success? Would they be prepared to do things they hated to make tons of money? Would they be willing to sacrifice their health? Or their principles? Many seemed to be quite

ready to do several of these things; quite a few respondents had divorced, had problems with their children, or had lifestyle-related health issues.

Obviously, it hadn't dawned on some of these executives that how they spent their time might be more important than the time they spent making money. After all, money mistakes can be corrected, but time, once past, is gone forever. And while they may have thought that they possessed wealth, it might actually have been the other way around: wealth may have possessed them. They didn't realize that a position of wealth might well represent another form of poverty.

A tragic irony of life is that we so often achieve financial independence after the chief reason for which we sought it has gone. Upon reflection, some respondents commented that making money their primary objective may have been the greatest mistake of their lives. Money could buy them everything—except the chance to do it again.

Work/Career

For a considerable number of respondents, real success equated to finding work that they loved. For these people, pursuing a satisfying career provided them with a considerable amount of gratification. One entrepreneur said she didn't want to wake up every morning not wanting to go to work, she wanted to wake up every morning with a smile on her face, and added, "I believe in the adage that if you do work that you love and the work fulfills you, the rest will come." Another respondent quoted Voltaire: "Work banishes those three great evils: boredom, vice, and poverty."

By contrast, a number of respondents viewed work as a necessary evil. These executives didn't recognize the enjoyment factor in work. Although enjoyment is a subjective concept, it's not difficult to understand that executives who judge themselves to be happy in their work are likely to be more productive and perform better than those who admit to being unhappy (unless they happen to have a masochistic disposition).

Many of the respondents were also strong believers in hard work. They felt that the only way they could get anywhere in life was to work hard at it. As one observed,

“Hard work makes a difference, no matter what you do—whether you’re a painter, an actor, a physician, or a businessman. There is no way around it... Life is like riding a bike. It is impossible to maintain your balance while standing still.” For these people, the fact of having made an effort, and remained true to certain ideals, justified the struggle itself. A leading banker pointed out, “When you see a man at the top of a mountain, he didn’t fall there.” Although it is quite possible to work without results, it is unlikely one will achieve results without work.

Recognition/fame

The influence of recognition or fame as a success indicator should not be underestimated. The respondents who cited recognition as important were motivated by the acceptance, approval, and appreciation of their achievements by others. Positive feedback was extremely important to them.

To some people, fame and recognition boil down to the desire to be more than just a faceless member of the community. Given their rather narcissistic disposition; they want to be visible, and to be noticed. At its extreme, this tendency leads celebrities to do crazy things because fame, or perhaps notoriety, heightens their perception of self-worth. The more people react, the more such behavior is reinforced, leading to the phenomenon of fame that is only very loosely linked to achievement, if at all. In the long run, logic tells us that fame through achievement is best: after all, who is the more significant role model, Paris Hilton or Mother Theresa?

Why do some people have a desperate urge to be recognized, to be famous? The obvious and most usual answer is lack of emotional support and recognition when growing up. Just as some of those respondents driven by the need to acquire wealth came from poor backgrounds, those who cited fame as their motivation were trying to compensate for an earlier deficit.

Not all respondents understood this. One stated rather naively, “If you’re famous, you’re free. If you’re famous, you don’t have to work. If you’re famous, you can buy anything you want. If you’re famous, nobody can tell you what to do. If you’re famous, you can have interesting friends and go to interesting parties!”

For most, however, a little thought revealed that fame is largely about “getting there,” and is illusory: on arrival, you find there’s no “there” there. Or the fame disappears almost as soon as it is won. This was expressed by the CFO of a successful restaurant chain who said, “I have come to realize that fame is a very elusive thing—here today, gone tomorrow. But, in spite of knowing that, I tell myself that it is better to be a has-been than never-was.”

It was evident to some that they continued to be driven by the need for recognition and fame, despite recognizing its ephemeral nature. “Fame is a beast that just gets hungrier; it needs to be continuously fed,” one respondent told me. Another pointed out that, “Getting what I want from others only feels good for a moment. It’s tiring to always be trying to get from others what I need to be able to give to myself.” “Recognition and fame doesn’t make for tranquility,” said the first, “but it does make for loneliness.”

Power

As a success indicator, power was not just about having it, but also about feeling that it was still growing. The theme of righting earlier wrongs was strong in this group, with many having previously known situations where they were quite powerless. For many of the respondents I listened to, power also symbolized freedom, independence, and liberty. The confidence that came with possessing power made them feel better in themselves. Power helped build self-worth and a sense of self-efficacy.

In spite of their fascination with power, there were those who recognized its corrupting influence. They were quite aware of power’s darker side. They also commented on the danger of people using power arbitrarily.

The executives who identified power as an important factor felt that it could be a great positive force, if used selectively and for constructive ends. They talked about the need to combine power with responsibility. As one executive said, “Power can be used for good or bad. My challenge is to use the power I possess wisely, so the way I use power must always be accompanied by moral choice.” However, he went on to point out, “If you’re in a position to make things happen, if you have the power to do so, it gives you tremendous opportunities.”

According to these executives, effectiveness in an organizational setting will always require the recognition, acquisition, and use of power. They made it quite clear that although absolute power corrupts absolutely, so too does absolute weakness. Power used in a positive way can enhance organizational commitment and teamwork, and raise morale. The perception was that, if those in leadership positions did not exercise power, people in organizations would be more likely to ignore the need to cooperate, participate, engage in, or be subjected to other influences. They added that without power, new ideas might be generated but would not be implemented. Hence having the power of decision gave these executives the opportunity to get things done.

Unfortunately, some people may have a lot of power but failing to harness it in the right way, they accomplished little. Some of the respondents noted ruefully that power can contribute to inner rot; it can become toxic. Furthermore, they acknowledged that power, however it has evolved, is not usually given up without a struggle. All too often, those who have been intoxicated with power, and have derived any kind of benefit from it, have great difficulty abandoning it. The greater the power gained, the greater the appetite for it. Although many people love power, those who desire it most are seldom the fittest to have it.

I put one last question to them: isn't true freedom having power over ourselves? Perhaps the ultimate purpose of getting power is to be able to give it away.

Winning/Overcoming Challenges

When Roman Abramowitz was asked why he wanted to buy an English football club, he replied: "The goal is to win. It's not about making money. I have many much less risky ways of making money than this. I don't want to throw my money away, but it's really about having fun—and that means success and trophies."

Challenges make us discover new things about ourselves that we might never have known otherwise. The respondents described this as a need to find ways to stretch themselves. "I have to compete at the highest level to feel good about myself," said an investment banker. "To feel truly alive, I need to get out of my comfort zone. For me, to compete is to exist."

The desire to compete is a very basic need within us all. Society and the environment in which we live contribute to its intensity, and in some ways, competition can be extremely beneficial and can contribute to excellence. Someone with a competitive spirit is always raring to go, to experiment, to take initiative and to take on new challenges. But problems arise because one win is almost never enough. “I love to compete,” said a senior government official. “I love to win. I have always competed with everyone, and everything, I can’t really help myself. But even if I win, it is never good enough. I have to enter the next race. When you reach the top, you have to keep on climbing.”

An overemphasis on continually winning can have negative repercussions in the business world, when the pursuit of short-term goals can be to the detriment of long-term benefits. Leaders obsessed with winning may be managing for economic decline.

Another problem with this view of success emerged when a number of the respondents mentioned that the desire to win was as much about the reactions of others as it was about pushing oneself to the limit. “Being able to beat others and making them jealous,” was how the CEO of a large accountancy firm put it. They seemed to agree with the writer Gore Vidal, who claimed, “Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies.”

Such an attitude indicates a stark view of life; a world where there are only winners and losers, and losers may well harbor grudges. The visibility and power associated with winning imply that this type of success comes with ample reasons to watch one’s back; hence the need to compete can turn into a toxic pursuit and become quite destructive.

Our discussion led to a deeper insight when the government official reflected, “Maybe it’s because I have something to prove. Maybe it’s because I don’t feel good enough in my skin. Maybe it’s because there is something missing inside me.”

Friendships

“Friendships are very important to me,” said the COO of a telecommunications company. “Having good friends signifies how successful I am in life. It means I have treated others well.” She went on to explain the importance of friendships in the context of self-expression, saying, “If you are not happy and confident with who you are, you will find it very difficult to establish true friendships.”

Those who viewed success as the ability to make good friends and keep deep friendships throughout their lives believed that without friendships, they would never be able to achieve their ultimate goals and dreams. In that respect, friendships could be viewed as a means to an end.

Some commented on what they did to make their friendships last. One talked about the need to be a “giver” rather than a “taker,” sharing in her friends’ successes and empathizing when things didn’t go so well. Most of them, emphasized the importance of keeping on doing things together to have new shared experiences—an important factor of maintaining the durability of friendships.

Meaning

The idea of success being linked with meaning tended to emerge, in particular, among the older participants, when they had begun to ask themselves whether they would be leaving this world better than they had found it. Had they done enough meaningful things in their life? Their criterion for success had the wider connotation of success as a human being, rather than an organizational leader, and was evidenced by their differentiation from others through their ability to engage in altruistic behavior.

One CEO had engaged in a variety of apparently altruistic activities, including helping to set up a school in Tanzania, but he recognized that his actions might sometimes be viewed ambivalently. “I know that even when I appear to act altruistically, there might be other reasons for my behavior,” he pointed out. “It might be viewed as a way of earning future favors, or of boosting my reputation. Whatever the reasons may be, the most important one to me is the feeling that comes from acting unselfishly.” This executive’s attitude encapsulates reciprocal altruism, a natural pattern of social interaction where one person provides a benefit to another. This type of human

behavior allows the expectation of future reciprocity, a situation where altruistic and egotistical needs combine.

The classic exercise of writing our own obituary often throws up thoughts about how we define success and meaning in our lives. I have often asked executives if they wanted to be “the richest person in the graveyard,” which reflected neatly how some of the older respondents were viewing success. Since the typical measures of success—awards, money, promotions, responsibility, accolades—mean nothing once we are gone, they had come to think that their success might best be measured by how many people’s lives they had touched—and, they hoped, made better. “If, after you are gone, people remember you for the good you have done, or if you have made the world better in some way, then I’d argue that you have been successful in a meaningful way,” said one senior executive.

Important to this group of respondents was building value into the lives of the people coming after them—younger colleagues at work, children at home, or both. My conversations with this group made it clear that these people actualized their values. Through their helpful acts they ratified the kind of people they were, or wanted to be, and the kind of world they wanted to live in. They also satisfied a fundamental human interest in shaping the world in the light of their values as a way of affirming their identity. As the old saying goes, “People work for money but they die for a cause.”

What lies beneath

If we cannot define a universal notion of success for the individual, can we describe its nature, and get closer to an understanding of where our feelings of success come from? It seems from my discussions that there are several routes to feeling successful, including planning, and the interplay between internal and external validating factors. Ultimately, our perceptions of success come from our inner script, the internalization of everything we have learnt from our very earliest days onward.

Plan to succeed

To many, planning plays a very important role in the success equation. The etymological origins of the word are the Latin *successus*, meaning an advance, succession, or happy outcome, and *succedere*, “to come after.” Success alludes to winning, overcoming something, or a record of achievements. Success is therefore the completion of something intended, something planned.

So making plans and following them through spells success. But by the same reckoning, making plans and not following them through constitutes failure. The assumption is that without a plan, or an attempt to achieve a target, goal, objective, or desire, we cannot know whether we have actually succeeded. This thinking, however, begs the question of whether success is solely the end result of an action or the accumulation of a series of actions. Is it still possible to be successful if we don’t achieve what we desired, planned, or attempted? Although we may feel successful when we reach a target, goal, or objective, can we feel successful on our way there? Is reaching a planned outcome the only criterion for success?

Clearly, the answers to these questions depend on our idea of what success means. If we consider success as only an end result, we will not be satisfied until we achieve whatever targets, goals, and objectives we have set for ourselves. This formula, as many of my respondents have discovered to their dismay, can reveal that the closer we get to the top, the more we discover that there is no “top.” As the ancient philosophers used to say of life itself, “The journey is all, the end nothing.” Perhaps success should be measured by our ability to obtain satisfaction from the steps we take on the way? From this perspective, reaching an ultimate goal is less important. Success is then a continuing series of accomplishments.

Who is watching—and applauding?

Whatever we plan—and achieve—will feel hollow unless it is validated in some way. Success isn’t success until it is measured or otherwise recognized. From my discussions, it became clear that many of the executives in this study needed an audience to feel that they were successful. However, their answers to the question, “Who is your audience?” demonstrated that some felt that the “audience” was really

themselves—it was internal validation they sought—whereas others needed validation from an external audience to confirm their achievements. Many needed both.

An orchestra conductor once told me, “I do not find success in the applause of the audience; it lies rather in the personal satisfaction of accomplishments. I know when I have done an excellent job directing. Although it is nice to be appreciated, I don’t really need others to tell me so.” The writer Oscar Wilde went one step further. When asked how his new play had been received, he replied, “The play was a great success but the audience a total failure.” Clearly, these two examples have no need of external validation. They value and rely on their own judgment about whether or not they have succeeded, and that is sufficient for them.

Another famous figure from the world of the arts, the actress Sarah Bernhardt, revealed the pressures in seeking external validation—“Once the curtain is raised, the actor ceases to belong to himself. He belongs to his character, to his author, to his public. He must do the impossible to identify himself with the first, not to betray the second, and not to disappoint the third.” While we perhaps shouldn’t view external validation as always “doing the impossible,” needing outsiders, especially strangers, to validate one’s feelings of being successful produces a tenuous psychological equilibrium.

We can relate this back to the different criteria for success described by our executives. Those who prioritized family and meaning were seeking internal validation, whereas those who prioritized money, winning, etc., tended to be more focused on the external validation that came with the trappings of their chosen type of success—the recognition, the large house, the expensive car, and the yacht.

When we feel positive about ourselves—when we possess a solid sense of self-esteem—we do not need external validation for success. It is not really the events taking place in our lives that disturb our psychological equilibrium; what matters is how we perceive and interpret them. A source of despair for one person may be a source of joy to another. It is good to be praised for something we have done, but if we don’t feel in our guts that we deserve it, the praise just doesn’t feel good enough.

The question is not whether something looks good to the outside world but whether it feels good inside.

High dependency on others suggests the lack of a solid sense of self-esteem, and a high degree of insecurity. People with this need will require a continual stream of reassurance, support, and approval from external sources in order to feel successful.

For most of us, the experience of success is actually determined by both internal and external factors. We will only reach our goals with the help of others, and we can only enjoy the fruits of our success with the help of others, whether active or passive. If we accept the idea of an intrinsic/extrinsic duality in the success equation, the widest definition of success is achieving our personal goals. The key word is “personal.” Most respondents agreed that a successful life is lived through understanding and pursuing our own path in life, not chasing the dreams of others.

The idea of contrasting intrinsic and extrinsic success implies that we measure ourselves against ourselves and nobody else. In the case of intrinsic success, the real contest in our internal world will be between what we have done and what we believe we are capable of doing. Intrinsic success indicators are our assessment of whether we have displayed authenticity, sincerity, truth, and goodness in reaching our goals. In contrast, the objects of extrinsic success, such as wealth, fame, and outward appearances, can seem extremely facile.

It is all about you

No-one is born successful, but our perception of what constitutes success starts early in life, when we start to write our inner script. In the very early years, our principal caretakers are also our scriptwriters, influencing how our fantasies and daydreams of success are internalized.

There is an African tale about a grandfather and grandson, sitting by the fire at night, contemplating the meaning of life. The grandfather says quietly, “We all have a war going on inside us between the hyena and the eagle. Each one of them is a formidable

warrior, eager to combat the other. The hyena brings anger, hatred, revenge, spite, vindictiveness, sadness, and despair, emotions that may destroy our soul. The eagle brings hope, joy, faith, generosity, optimism, growth, resilience, laughter, and love, which allows our soul to soar to ever greater heights.” The grandson reflects on the story for a few moments, and then asks, “Grandfather, which one of the animals will be victorious?” The grandfather looks deep into the eyes of boy and says, “The one we feed.”

The inner script we all develop while growing up might include a positive, “can-do” attitude to life, or it might be negative, full of limiting beliefs about ourselves, our abilities, and the joys we are entitled to. Negative scripts can create mental tapes in our head that play continuously, telling us that we do not deserve success, that we are incapable of it, cannot achieve it, or cannot sustain it. If we listen, we are feeding the hyena.

Whether the hyena or the eagle predominates in our personality will very much depend on the kind of support we receive from our parents, grandparents, siblings, peers, and teachers. Children who receive “good enough” care while growing up will acquire an inner sense of security, a sense of self-efficacy, and the capacity for self-improvement. Children who receive inadequate care, due to over-stimulation, under-stimulation, or inconsistent parenting, may become psychologically damaged and less able to create a successful life. Often they will have been told that they are worthless, that they will amount to nothing. Nonetheless, some will have had enough positive experiences to enable them to overcome the negative aspects of their upbringing, despite what they have been told about themselves. To these people, one of the greatest pleasures in life will always be found in doing what others have told them they cannot do. They will have a greater drive to strive for success than most. Their urge to overcome, to master their inner insecurity, and to control their own destiny, is enormous. These people are prepared to take responsibility for their lives; they do not blame others for the poor hand of cards they have been dealt but, on the contrary, play cleverly with what they have. They feed the eagle.

There are others, however, who lack the will to prove their “tormentors” wrong and seem to build their own psychic prison, with *leitmotifs* such as self-destruction, self-

indulgence, and self-pity. Either they give up before they have started, or they develop a debilitating sense of entitlement. These are the people for whom success seems elusive.

Unfortunately, quite a few of my respondents seemed to be feeding the hyena, and were very confused about the meaning of success. For them, failure to succeed had become a self-fulfilling prophecy. They made half-hearted attempts to pursue their dreams, but whatever they did, they were cursed by their negativity and self-doubt, setting themselves up to fail before they had even tried.

So what distinguishes those who feed the eagle from those who feed the hyena?

Focus

The key to success for many people is making their dreams come true, so the essential first step to is to decide what those dreams are, what they *really want*. It appears that the real tragedy in life is not failing to reach our goals; it is having no goals to reach.

The very successful executives I have interviewed generally have a considerable amount of fantasy and imagination. They think ahead and create a mental picture of what they want to achieve, filling in the details as they go along. They have focus.

Persistence

These successful people also have constancy of purpose in pursuing their dreams. They don't wait for success to come along; they actively pursue it. As one entrepreneur told me, "Desire is the key to motivation, but it is determination and commitment to pursuing your goal that brings success."

All the successful people I have met have been extremely persistent. They never took no for answer; they never gave up; they had the ability to hang on after others have let go. Persistence is crucial because success in any area requires a lot of practice. It is not just talent that contributes to success; it is also the desire to hone this talent, to persevere. Recent research has demonstrated that any outward success was the result of 10,000 hours of application. From my observation, successful people not only take

hard work for granted, but, more often than not, they also succeed through failure. Failure is the great teacher in telling them how to do things better.

Success and failure are very closely linked, and we learn more wisdom from failure than from success. We may be disappointed if we fail, but we will be worse off if we don't try. As I listened to people's success stories, it was noticeable how often success was associated with the ability to go from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm. In many instances, success seemed to be largely a matter of holding on after others had let go. "I don't think I'd be the success I am now if I hadn't been fired earlier in my career," said a senior management consultant. "There have to be some disasters along the way, or you may lose touch with reality."

Excellence is the brother of persistence. Successful people often do ordinary things extraordinary well. They abhor mediocrity; they want to be the best in whatever they do. Richard Branson once told me he wanted "to be proud of what we are doing." "I tell my people that we don't need to be the biggest in the industry we are in as long as we are the best. I want our company to be known for its quality products and services. Wherever I go I make an effort to get that message across. I have been extremely persistent in doing so."

Self-mastery

Benjamin Franklin once said, "There are three things extremely hard: steel, a diamond, and to know oneself." Without self-knowledge, or an understanding of the working and functioning of our inner world, we will be a slave to forces beyond our control. Real success begins with the mastery of our thoughts. Although we cannot always control what happens to us, we can control our attitude toward what happens to us, and be in a position of self-mastery. Winners are people who think they can—or who succeed in overcoming feelings that they can't.

Many successful people have been troubled by lack of self-confidence and self-doubt, despite their demonstrable successes, financial or otherwise. However, they have been prepared to confront the problem and make an effort at self-mastery. "Everything I've ever done was out of fear of being a nothing in life," the CEO of a company in the

travel business told me. “Success is very much a state of mind—if you want to succeed, you do well to start thinking of yourself as a success.”

Often, the major cause of human failure is lack of faith in what we can do. People can become remarkable when they start to think that they can do things. Barack Obama tapped into this strength on the presidential campaign trail, telling American citizens that change was possible, however bad things seemed—“Yes, we can” left no room for the doubters.

The price of success

Bill Keenan¹, the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, was known for his “can-do” attitude, a compulsive worker who rarely took time out for a vacation. Bill craved success because he had a great fear of failure. He didn’t want to be like his father, whose career had stalled at a mid-management level in a small firm. The clear message Bill received from his mother when growing up was not to become like his father. To be a middle manager was not good enough. Success was to become the head of a large corporation. It seemed at times to Bill that his mother had tasked him with a “mission impossible.”

After a successful education, Bill was hired as a trainee at a large multinational corporation. He was soon seen as a rising star, and in his early thirties was put in charge of one of his company’s major divisions. In a very short time, he increased the market share of his division from \$50 million to \$1 billion. Eventually, he became the frontrunner to succeed the outgoing CEO.

But despite his outward success, Bill felt extremely stressed. He was putting himself under immense pressure to keep the appearance that everything was fine, and when he was selected for the top job, his stress level grew exponentially. To make things worse, once he was in the new position, he

¹ Name disguised.

experienced a sense of “blah”—was this all there was to life? This feeling of emptiness was an additional strain on him. Bill began to have sleeping problems and nightmares. He experienced a great deal of anxiety about being good enough. In addition, he was prone to dwelling obsessively about how to deal with the emptiness he felt inside. Was the answer to enter another “race?” Was there another level of success he could pursue? After all, there were always more prestigious jobs in the market. But would that imply even more pressure—and stress?

As well as these feelings of emptiness, Bill lived in fear of losing what he had achieved. At times, he would ask himself increasingly whether he really deserved to be CEO. Did he have what it took to handle the job? Would he be able to maintain the respect of others? He also knew that other people envied him. There were plenty who would like to take what he had achieved away from him.

What looked like success from a distance did not feel good to Bill once he had achieved it and, as time passed, the strain took its toll on him. He felt increasingly empty, and drained. Progressively, he felt that he was living on the edge, liable to fall into the abyss at any moment.

The only thing that helped Bill to maintain his psychological equilibrium were occasional outings with his three kids. Doing things with them helped him to relax. But that solace was dramatically removed when Bill’s wife announced she was leaving him and wanted a divorce. Although this did come as a surprise, Bill realized that he had been too self-involved to hear her repeated complaints. She had finally had enough after too many years of being ignored, pointing out that money had been no substitute for his lack of attention. What really hurt was that she was moving to another part of the country and taking the children with her.

Soon after that bad news, Bill collapsed in his office with heart palpitations. Doctors’ orders were to take time off. Bill persuaded the members of his board that he had a reoccurring back injury and needed two months’ medical leave,

but this didn't help. Almost as soon as he got back on the job two months later, his depression returned. Antidepressants didn't have much effect and Bill's general practitioner advised him to see a psychotherapist. Initially reluctant, Bill was forced to acknowledge that he had no choice.

Bill found the opportunity to talk to someone about his fears and anxieties extremely helpful. The sessions with the psychotherapist made him realize how much his identity and self-esteem had been built on a continuous string of perceived successes. He also understood his persistent unconscious need to show his mother that he was successful. He had been colluding with her "mission impossible"—to better his father—and it drove him incessantly.

Bill realized that he needed to learn what was important to him, not to others. Encouraged by his therapist, he decided to take my senior executive seminar. Mixing with a group of other CEOs in an environment that emphasized trust, cooperation, and constructive feedback helped Bill to understand that he was not alone in his misery. There were many others trying to deal with similar issues. What also helped was the realization that no success or failure is necessarily final. Vicarious learning, listening to the stories of his fellow participants, became a very powerful experience, putting Bill on the road to recovery. The interchanges with his colleagues and the faculty clarified his needs, rather than the needs of others. Participating in these courageous conversations increased his self-confidence that he was good enough.

There is certainly a downside to success, as Bill's story demonstrates. Whatever goal has been achieved, for some people it never seems satisfactory, and they straight away set new goals. "There is no point at which you can say, 'Well, I've done it. I can relax,'" (senior consultant). "On the contrary, the toughest thing about success is that you've got to keep on being a success. It's like being on an endless treadmill. Arriving at one goal is the starting point to another." George Bernard Shaw maintained that he dreaded success. "To have succeeded is to have finished one's business on earth, like the male spider, who is killed by the female the moment he has succeeded in courtship. I like a state of continual becoming, with a goal in front and not behind."

Interestingly, another consequence of success can be the sense of failure that comes when one perceives that one has actually achieved one's goals: what I refer to as the Faust syndrome.

The Faust syndrome

According to the poet Joachim Du Bellay, "Happy the man who, like Ulysses, has made a fine voyage, or has won the Golden Fleece, and then returns, experienced and knowledgeable, to spend the rest of his life among his family!" However, Homer's *Odyssey* doesn't tell us very much about what happened after Ulysses' return. Was he happy sitting on his throne idling his days away? Was his wanderlust satisfied? I don't think so, given his previous track record. Sitting on the throne, his adventures behind him, may have made him disillusioned and depressed and prey to the Faust syndrome.

The Faust syndrome refers to what Nietzsche described as the "melancholia of everything completed." It suggests a state where the person feels that he or she has achieved everything possible and that there is nothing more to aim for. This state evokes melancholic feelings, which, if they are not dealt with, may contribute to irresponsible action as the individual tries to ward off the encroaching depression. Successful executives are especially vulnerable to this syndrome as a combination of forces impinges on them, both from within and without.

Success lessons

Understanding our own success indicators can help us both personally and in our work. By examining the many facets of success, we become more certain about what makes us feel successful. By analyzing our inner scripts and seeing how they affect our feelings of success, we can decide whether the direction we are heading is really our true north, or if we have let someone else choose the road for us. And once we know ourselves, we can start to understand what drives others to succeed, and harness that energy in beneficial ways.

My respondents had had surprises on their route to success. In many instances, success didn't materialize in the way they originally expected. As this discussion suggests, people found success in their jobs, material things, relationships, and/or self-value or self-worth. Some people felt successful when they made money and others felt successful when they helped the less fortunate. In general, however, the respondents seemed to be most motivated when they were working toward personally significant, challenging, but attainable goals. Most of them discovered, as time went on, that success is a moving target.

Ultimately, real success for many of these executives has more to do with what they have done for others than in material gain for themselves. Many of them, in seeking happiness for others, found success for themselves, a deep sense of contentment and satisfaction that came with seeing that they had made a difference for good in the world. These strong feelings of wellbeing may signify that the success of any life can only be measured by its impact on the lives of others. There is a strong argument for the idea that we are not really successful until we do something for someone who cannot reciprocate.

My final question in the interview process was to ask the executives what they would do in life if they couldn't fail. This prompted a great deal of thought and a wide variety of responses. Many talked about regrets—the other careers they would have chosen if they had not felt constrained by family and society. Many fantasized about what they would have done and uncovered some interesting ideas—some of which, they realized, they could still make come true. Although no one can go back and make a brand new start, it is possible to start in the present and make a brand-new ending. Of course, you can always follow Orson Welles advice, “If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story.”

Europe Campus

Boulevard de Constance

77305 Fontainebleau Cedex, France

Tel: +33 (0)1 60 72 40 00

Fax: +33 (0)1 60 74 55 00/01

Asia Campus

1 Ayer Rajah Avenue, Singapore 138676

Tel: +65 67 99 53 88

Fax: +65 67 99 53 99

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