



A Measure of Success

Does success bring happiness? Yes and no, depending on how you get it. One thing is sure: it is not as simple a question as it appears. Here we look at the world of career winners and losers — and wonder who, in the long run, the real winners are . . .

□ Different people attribute different meanings to the word “success,” but these days it is most likely to be used to describe the culmination of a career in a desirable position. When we say that someone has become successful, we normally mean that he or she has “made it” to a certain stage of affluence and social prominence.

It is reasonable to assume that most people aspire to a degree of this kind of success, if only to avoid the insecurity that comes with not having achieved it. They will work hard to gain it in the interests of ensuring their own or their childrens' future well-being.

The desire to “make something” of oneself is a prerequisite to progress in our type of economy. A nation's gross national product is essentially nothing more than the sum total of the labours of countless individuals in a broad range of activities. The work force would not work nearly so well if a large minority were not putting a little extra into their jobs in hopes of improving their situation in life.

The advances made by the majority of success-oriented men and women are limited but not unsatisfactory. Some, though, really do “make it big,” often as the result of single-minded drive.

They too contribute to the economy and the society. Intense ambition is not a wholly admirable trait, but jobs are created by entrepreneurs who want to become wealthy, and a passion for fame and power has been the driving force behind many worthy accomplishments in politics, scholarship, science and art.

Considering the social and economic benefits that arise from the impulse to succeed, one might expect to find it applauded by philosophers concerned with the best interests of humanity. But William James spoke for many of his fellow thinkers when he deplored “the exclusive worship of the bitch goddess SUCCESS.”

Writing in the United States in the early 1900s, James objected to the habit of measuring success by the yardstick of money, prominence and possessions instead of such values as personal character, compassion and social responsibility. If he were alive to see his native country (or, for that matter, Canada) today, he might be even more worried that what he called “the squalid cash interpretation” of success had cancelled out the word's larger meaning.

The media, and especially the advertising carried in them, promote the message that nothing is more important than acquiring the outward manifestations of “having it made” — the expensive houses, cars, clothes, jewellery, vacations, etc. The corollary is that anyone who doesn't have these things is pretty much out in the cold socially.

James was worried about the effects on ethics of making material success the be-all and end-all of life. A visit to a big city book store today might be enough to persuade him that his worst fears had been realized. Where in his day, Benjamin Franklin's *The Road of Wealth* once stood with its message that thrift and industry were the keys to advancement, he would find a line-up of how-to-succeed

manuals which advise their readers to let nothing — least of all their consciences — stand in their way.

These books freely promote bluffing, bullying and manipulating colleagues as career-building tactics. A sampling of their titles will suffice to convey their spirit: *Power. How to Get It. How to Use It.*; *Winning at Office Politics*; *Winning Through Intimidation*.

The recurrent references to winning are an interesting reflection of present-day attitudes towards getting ahead. They imply that one must “beat” one’s career competitors. In place of Franklin’s long, rigorous road, the metaphor for the pursuit of a successful career has become a professional football field on which one tramples over the opposition through a combination of relentless drive, brute strength and deception.

Football analogies are, in fact, frequently used in modern business discussions, and the most famous saying to emerge from the sport, by coach Vince Lombardi, is often quoted: “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the *only* thing.”

This clearly suggests that, as long as you win, the means you employ to do so are of secondary importance. It turns inside-out the old dictum once taught to youths: “It matters not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game.”

Real life is not a game of victory and defeat

The game in question here is the game of life, and playing it properly entails giving precedence to honour, decency and civility. These days, anyone who plays it that way is likely to be categorized in another sports analogy as a “loser.” The implication is that a loser is not hard-nosed enough, not *mean* enough, to do the amoral things that have to be done to succeed.

The theory is that people who let their scruples interfere with their advancement are naively blind to modern reality. Yet the winning-is-everything school is not realistic itself. It presents the misleading impression that life is a clear-cut matter of winning or losing. In the world of victory and defeat which it depicts, there are no second- or third-place finishes, no split decisions, no ties or draws.

Life does not work that way. It is ambiguous and inconclusive. In the real world, everything is relative. A relative failure in one thing (say a career) may be balanced by a relative success in another (say raising a family well).

Still, there is little doubt that this black-and-white, win-or-lose view is widely held. Wendell Johnson described its adherents in his classic study, *People in Quandaries*. “Since their notions of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ are ultimately of an absolute character and are consequently vague and two-handed, they tend to assume that they have ‘failed’ until they have unquestionably ‘succeeded.’ As a result, they feel driven to aim high, to be ‘tops,’ to break records, to do something ‘bigger and better,’” Johnson observed.

Parent-driven achievers may be scarred for life

When such would-be champions do not unequivocally succeed, they menace both themselves and those around them. The well-known American management psychologist Harry Levinson reported that “workaholics” who are thwarted in their ambitions “become increasingly irritable and abusive with their spouses, children and fellow employees. Some suffer chronic depression; others die early from heart attacks.”

“People with extraordinarily high ego ideals can never fulfil them, and they judge themselves harshly for their failure,” Levinson writes. “They need help to see and esteem their many accomplishments. We need to look forward to the future and strive for new ideals, but we also need to live in the present and value what we’ve got now.”

The probability is that at least some of these troubled individuals were the children of parents who saddled them with impossibly high aspirations in an attempt to compensate for their own self-perceived failures. Men and women with unfulfilled ambitions have a tendency to transfer them to their offspring, prodding them to go farther and higher in life than they have gone themselves.

Nothing could be more normal than to want one's children to do well. What is abnormal — and what gives rise to emotional abnormality — is for parents to treat as failures sons and daughters who have not lived up to their expectations. If they have "failed," it is often because their parents threw them into the wrong occupational stream in the first place. Whatever the cause, young people who are made to believe that they have let their parents down are subject to carrying feelings of guilt and inadequacy around with them for the rest of their lives.

The imposter syndrome and fear of success

Overly high expectations are not the only source of emotional problems associated with the success ethic. Because of the emphasis placed on succeeding as a requirement for social acceptance, young people who do not have the opportunity or the ability to succeed are made to feel like pariahs. Some become bitter rebels, some lose hope and resign themselves to idleness, some turn to drugs and/or crime.

Curiously, other psychological problems may grow out of experiencing *too much* success — and not only the obvious problems of letting it go to one's head or adopting a dissolute lifestyle. Psychologists lately have been taking a growing interest in successful persons who suffer from the "imposter syndrome." They have the guilty feeling that they are cheating the world by carrying out professional functions for which they are not qualified, even though they actually are.

The imposter syndrome is related to the fear of success, which prevents its sufferers from living up to their potential. Acting out of an unconscious conviction that the achievements they have made are not justified, they run away from any opportunity to achieve still more.

"For example," writes psychological consultant Aaron Hemsley, "it is not uncommon for a life insurance agent who is leading his office in sales to develop a sickness that makes it impossible for him to work or perhaps have an uncontrollable desire

to take a few weeks off to attend his high school reunion . . . Consider the individual who says, 'I don't want to be number one, number two is just fine. I'm lazy and I don't want to have to continue proving myself year after year. I like the recognition, but I don't want the responsibility.' To this person, the danger of being prominent is equated to the danger of responsibility."

While some avoid building on the success they have already gained, others shy away from competing for it at the outset. They think along the lines of the English stage character who said: "Who wants to get on? It's only changing what you are for something no better." They worry that prosperity and prominence might alter their personalities, and alienate them from their roots.

Then, too, they may shrink from striving for bigger and better things because of what they have heard about the savagery of the "corporate jungle" and its counterparts in other lines of endeavour. Some feel that the sacrifices of personal integrity which they might be called upon to make could never be justified by the dubious rewards these sacrifices might yield.

Those who make it to the top are generally decent people

It would be naive to believe that no unsavoury methods are employed in the jostling for position in the workplace. The atmosphere of dog-eat-dog competition can be hard to take. According to American social critic Harry Stein, this is especially so for women: ". . . Under intense, often self-imposed pressure to succeed professionally, yet unprepared by experience to run over people en route to wherever it is they think they are heading, [they] often find themselves in an unsettling quandary."

Nevertheless, the notion that one must necessarily resort to gutter tactics to get ahead is largely the product of modern media-fed mythology. To begin with, the worst rats in the rat race are apt to disqualify themselves far short of the finish line. This is mainly because their devious behaviour drives away their peers, and achievements in business and the professions today are usually the result of co-operative efforts. Success ultimately depends on getting things done, so it is difficult to succeed in the long run if you have forfeited your colleagues' support.

Popular opinion notwithstanding, those who make it to or near the top are generally decent, hard working types who inspire others to work with them. Yet, the theory that nice guys finish last remains pervasive, lending a negative coloration to young peoples' views of the working world.

Harry Stein recently felt called upon to correct the impression that a person must be unscrupulous to succeed: "The very simple truth is that ambition and integrity are no more mutually exclusive than wisdom and wit . . . Our problem — and yes, for some it is nearly insurmountable — is to get beyond the psychological flotsam that has become inextricably bound up with the idea of success in this country. It is essential for those driven to succeed to learn, and relearn, that how one gets there is finally as important as the arriving; and for those who are ill at ease with the whole process to understand that no one is corruptible unless he lets himself be."

The answer to that oft-asked question, "Does success bring happiness?" would seem to hinge on what one has done to obtain it. A person ruthless and callous enough to make his way in the world at any price is unlikely to form the kind of lasting, loving personal relationships that make for fulfilled human beings.

On the other hand, there is solid evidence that success *does* bring happiness to those who have achieved it with a clear conscience. A 10-year study

conducted by the General Motors Research Institute among rising men in various occupations in the U.S. showed that as they advanced to successively higher positions, they became markedly more stable emotionally and mentally, and better-able to withstand strain.

It's a mistake to see it as a straight line to the top

This is not surprising given that the personal qualities that lead to success in a career are precisely those that tend to lead to an untroubled and satisfying life in general. The illustrious political economist Walter Bagehot summed them up in two words: "animated moderation." The great essayist Joseph Addison advised: "If you wish success in life, make perseverance your bosom friend, experience your wise counsellor, caution your elder brother, and hope your guiding genius."

Note that Addison wrote "success in life" and not "success in your job" or "in making money." True success must take in the totality of a person's life. Anyone who thinks of him- or herself as successful would do well to think of it this way: I'm a success . . . at what? Am I a success as a family member, a partner, a friend, a citizen? Am I a success, in short, as a human being?

Success is achievement, yes; but it is not only professional or business achievement. It is a common mistake of our times to see it in occupational terms as a straight line leading to the top. Rather, it takes the form of a circle of achievement in all the various aspects of living. No one who has not completed that circle can truly be called a success.