RULE ONE: EACH PERSON HAS THEIR OWN DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

There is no universal definition of “success.” Everyone has their individual vision of what it means to be fulfilled.

Success is many things. It is both a concept and an experience, a moment as well as an evolution. It is the merging of your aspirations with reality; the weaving of your hopes and dreams with your daily tasks. It is simultaneously tangible and ephemeral, and gives the illusion of being universally quantifiable. Success is externally evaluated, yet intrinsically experienced; it is both objective and subjective. The true essence of success, beneath the visible markers and goals, lies in your own personal sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.

What comes to mind for you when you think about “success?”

What are the images you see? What does it feel like in your bones to have succeeded? Do you imagine reaching the apex of your profession? Or do you imagine amassing great wealth? Does it mean seeing your face on the cover of national magazines or reading your name in “Who’s Who?”

For some people success may be any one or all of these. For others, it may be something entirely different, like perhaps earning enough money to retire at 50, or having their own art show in a gallery, or coaching their child’s little league team to victory. To some, success looks like grand achievement, to others it resembles daily rewards, and still others measure it as the accomplishment of an underlying life mission. It may mean being a good friend, or raising socially
responsible children, or being a loving grandparent. For some, the achievement looks like having lived ethically, honorably, or according their values and conscience. For many, finding or sustaining a romantic relationship or marriage is a goal. Overcoming a disability, hardship, challenge or obstacle is the criteria for some, whereas breaking records – athletic, financial, historic or scientific – is where fulfillment lies for others.

Since each person is an individual, comprised of their own visions and standards, each one defines success in their own way. My definition is probably not the same as yours, nor is yours exactly the same as that of other people you know. We are a constellation of individuals, each holding our own place in the cosmos and twinkling from within as a result of whatever gives us our own individual glow. The first basic rule of success, and perhaps the most important, is that there is no one universal definition of fulfillment. We each have our own, and every one is equally precious and worthy.

THE STANDARDS OF SUCCESS

The popular cultural definition of success in industrial nations is based primarily on three elements: power, money, and fame. It is assumed that if you are in possession of great abundance, have status or power, or are recognized as a celebrity, then you are, by society’s definition, “successful.” If you have even one of those three requirements, you qualify.
There is, however, one major problem with this definition: it is severely limited. It excludes a multitude of people who are successful in their own right, and who define success by an entirely different set of standards. These are the people whose bank balances may not be especially noteworthy, nor do they brandish significant authority, nor are they necessarily recognized when they walk down the street. Rather, these are the people who have realized goals and dreams that have been set from within, rather than those dictated by societal norms.

Consider the school principal who started a middle school that teaches children values and self-esteem and love of nature. Is creating an environment where children grow in healthy ways and develop awareness and values any less successful than the business tycoon who masterminds corporate buyouts?

Consider the person who volunteers at their local hospital to read to the elderly whose eyes can no longer perform the task. Is this person any less of a success than the professional ball player who scores the winning run as the most valuable player?

Think about the scientist who has dedicated her life to finding a cure for cancer. Is she only considered a success if she actually finds the cure? Do the hours and dedication she has put forth only count if the result is achieved? Is the success measured only in the culmination or is the commitment, the perseverance, and the pursuit valued as well?
What about the middle-aged man who leaves his law practice to pursue his dream of carving and selling canoes? If his delight is in doing what makes him happy, is he any less prosperous than the celebrity who grosses $10 million per movie?

Success is amorphous, and like the other vast intangible – love – there is no universal means by which we can measure it. What it means for one person may not resonate for another. It may be the collective goal of many, but it ultimately has only one true judge. You, and only you, can assess your success, for it is you alone who determine what it really means for you.

THE DIFFERENT MODELS OF SUCCESS

“Make sure you have – and preserve – your own set of eyes.” – Laurie Beth Jones

Dana was in her thirties when she came to my workshop because she was experiencing what she called a “free-floating sense of dissatisfaction” with her job. She enjoyed the high-level position she held at a large computer company, but a small voice in her heart whispered to her that there was more. She had achieved each and every goal she had set before her, including promotions, raises, and even a much-coveted window office, yet she was not fulfilled.

As Dana talked, I picked up on phrases like “I should feel happy,” and “I look successful but I feel like a failure.” So I asked Dana point blank what would
make her feel like a success. She paused for less than fifteen seconds before blurting out “being able to bring my dog to work.”

It seems that Dana had always had a vision in her mind of being able to bring her beloved dog Bodhi with her to work. She had once visited a friend at her friend’s small boutique advertising agency and was delighted to see the agency’s owner’s Schnauzer greeting clients at the door. To Dana, being able to bring her dog to work signified autonomy; it meant one of two things: either she had climbed high enough on the corporate ladder that she was beyond policies, or that she was running her own company where she could establish her own rules. Deciding between the two was not difficult for her, and Dana is now happily running her own web design business, with Bodhi snoozing contentedly under her desk.

For some people, like Dana, success is synonymous with autonomy. For others it looks like financial freedom. Troy, for example, had a desire to earn enough money so that he could retire at age 50 and spend his days travelling around the world with his wife. To him, success meant being able to afford to do the things he wanted to do and to enjoy himself.

To Jeff, a stock broker in his forties, success was also measurable in financial terms. His, however, were different than Troy’s. His vision was to be able to make enough money to buy a home for his aging parents in Las Vegas for their retirement. Jeff was enormously grateful to his parents for all they had done for him, including both of them working two jobs to put him through college;
taking care of them in their later years for Jeff would be his ultimate joy and satisfaction.

Nina, an interior decorator who traveled extensively, did not relish dealing with logistics. When she dreamed of prosperity, it was with the vision of being able to hire people to help her with things like repairing her computer when it crashed, installing shelves in her closets, cleaning her apartment when she couldn’t find the time, arranging her travel plans, and so on. To Nina, fulfillment came in the form of making enough money to hire people to support her with her busy life.

For some, success is defined as emotional fulfillment and stability. Sondra came from a difficult and tumultuous childhood, and set a goal to create a happy, harmonious home for her children and her. Every night, when she sits down to dinner with her husband and three children, she is flooded with a sense of fulfillment. To Sondra, success is achieved each moment she experiences the joy of being together with her family.

Many – dare I hope most – parents deem raising their children well as a sign of success. Though Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis was an internationally known personality who enjoyed a prosperous lifestyle and had many glamorous and exciting experiences, she held her job as a parent as singularly most important. “If you bungle raising your kids,” she is quoted as saying, “I don’t think whatever else you do well matters very much.”
Success can be defined as glory, as it is for the athlete who wins a race or a mountain climber who scales Mt. Everest. Those in the armed services who serve their country might define success in these terms, as well.

Courage can be the model for success, at it is for those who must reach inside themselves for the stamina to overcome a serious illness or those who must face tragedies in life. Helen Keller is perhaps the most famous name symbolizing courage, as her triumph in life from within her sightless, soundless world stands as a symbol of what the human spirit is capable of. Her legacy includes one of my favorite quotes: “Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing.” Helen Keller’s life was certainly the former.

Another definition of success is making a difference. One way to make a difference is to change the way people perceive reality. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross was the first person to publicly embrace the concept of grief within the medical community, and as a result, the world came to understand and embrace a completely new way of dealing with loss. Her lifelong efforts put the heart back into the practice of medicine. To her, and to others like her, success meant changing the status quo.

Perhaps the accumulation of knowledge and understanding is what spells success for you. Leonardo da Vinci was fascinated by the nature of man and his place in the universe. Days before his death, Leonardo wrote “As a well-spent day brings happy sleep, so does a well-used life bring happy death.” Though his life ended in relative poverty and obscurity, it is clear from his words that he
viewed his time here as a success. It was success based on his terms of a fruitful life spent seeking the truth in all things – philosophy, art, music, anatomy, mathematics – and then sharing it with others.

For me, having a profound impact on one person’s life means that my life was not lived in vain. Each time I lead a workshop and see the spark ignite in one participant’s eye I feel as if I have succeeded. Seeing people change their behaviors, fulfilling their dreams, ending a cycle of self-sabotage, beginning to earnestly love themselves is what brings me a deep sense of fulfillment.

Clearly, no one definition of success is better than another. Desiring financial abundance is no less worthy than aspiring to have your face on the cover of a magazine, or aiming to get a bill passed in congress. Mother Teresa’s goal of aiding the poor and hungry is certainly noble, but is no less valid than that of Richard, one of my clients who aspired to own and operate his own pastry shop.

Whether your dream is dollars or satisfaction, sainthood or popularity, fame or authenticity, what makes your dream worthy and real is that it is yours. You alone set the standard of what it means for you to succeed in life, for it is you alone who knows what will truly fulfill you in your heart and make your life worth living.

YOUR PERSONAL DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

“Insist on yourself. Never imitate.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson
What does success mean to you? What will it take for you to feel fulfilled in life? To what do you aspire?

Establishing your personal definition of success is important because it will prevent you from spending precious time and energy pursuing goals that hold no true luster for you. It can be easy to follow the status quo and aim for the usual markers. Despite the fact that the world may applaud such efforts, however, goals that you are not authentically connected to are essentially meaningless.

With the achievement of every inauthentic goal, you will most likely feel a sense of emptiness, rather than a sense of satisfaction, since miscellaneous goals carry you further from your ultimate fulfillment. If you follow cultural expectations blindly and pursue wealth, power, or fame simply because you think that is what you are supposed to want, then grabbing these brass rings will feel meaningless. If you lack the connection to your own personal values, then you may wake up one day with the achievement of your goals only to feel disconnected from yourself.

If you reach for the corner office but do not truly aspire to it, the views will never really leave you breathless. If you know that success for you means building a cabin in the woods and living Thoreau’s life of peaceful solitude, then each public accolade of your latest public relations coup will ring hollow in your ears. If you amass a fortune, but privately measure prosperity according to
different standards, the money in the bank will never meet your deepest needs.

A dream realized that is not your own dream is like being served a scrumptious ice cream sundae made with flavors you don’t really like. It looks enticing, but the taste does not satisfy your true preferences.

**Knowing what success means to you**

You can only begin to know what success means to you by first taking apart the cultural dictates that you may have been living by and examining them to determine if they truly ring true for you. Importance, clout, VIP status, luxury cars, affluent addresses, a “normal” marriage, and expensive watches are external measurements of what our society generally views as the symbols of success. Perhaps that is because these are the markers that are the most universally appealing to many people. If these elements beckon to you, then you can weave your vision of success from them. You can pursue your dream and work towards earning or attaining the rewards that bring you joy.

Often, however, people pursue the popular trappings and/or goals without really knowing why. Perhaps they become caught up in the treadmill of “keeping up with the Jones.” When success is pursued as proof of your worthiness, you are giving your life and your efforts over to the assessment of others. On the other hand, when success is pursued as the alignment of your innermost values and your goals become the validation of your inner truth, you honor your presence here on Earth as meaningful and authentic.
Success can be assessed externally by observers evaluating whether you have met a standard established by society, however, at the end of the day, there is either a peaceful feeling within you or there is emptiness. The peaceful feeling signals that you have lived up to your expectations and personal visions for yourself. The emptiness is a clue that you were striving towards a definition of success and fulfillment that was never really yours to begin with.

**Establishing your vision**

To help my clients formulate their visions, I give them the following exercise which almost always excavates what it is that brings them fulfillment:

Complete the following incomplete sentences and write them down on a blank piece of paper. It is not sufficient to merely complete the sentences in your mind as you read them, you must commit your answers to paper. You can change what you wrote after you see them in print, but make sure you write them.

1. The people I view as successful are…
2. I feel successful when I…
3. My symbols of success are…
4. I would feel like a success if I…
5. If I were to write my ideal obituary based on the fact that my life was a success, it would read like this…
For example, you might list as a response to the first statement those people whom you know personally that appear successful to you, like the president of your company, a member of your club or Bob your neighbor, who just installed a swimming pool in his backyard. Or, you might list people you don’t know personally but admire from afar, like an accomplished athlete, a business mogul or a respected journalist. By identifying your role models, you can see whom you admire and then specify what attributes and behaviors you choose to emulate.

For example, Bianca listed her now-deceased grandmother Rose as someone she admired. Rose was a remarkably intelligent and feisty woman, and though it was almost unheard of in her day for women to go to college, she fought to be allowed to attend the university in the city close to her home. Despite the strong objections of her family, the disapproval of her small town, and the numerous obstacles placed in her path by the admissions board, Rose attended the university and earned a degree in medicine. Rose then went on to become a surgeon at a time when women were still mandated to cover their ankles and expected to stay at home and behave in a ladylike fashion.

Upon further reflection, Bianca saw that it was Rose’s courage in the face of adversity that she was drawn to, and realized that this was a quality she wanted to possess within herself. When she was diagnosed with throat cancer several years later, long after Rose had passed away, Bianca called upon her
spiritual connection to her grandmother to help her find her source of courage to successfully overcome her illness.

To answer the second statement, “I feel successful when I…,” think of the moments in life when you have felt truly fulfilled. Is it when you have achieved something? When you have received praise or validation from others? When you have had an impact on others’ lives? What is it that gives you the feeling that you are fulfilling your potential? Knowing this answer will show you the way towards the path that is most likely to spell success for you.

In response to the second statement, Abe, a car salesman, wrote “I feel successful when I see my commission check exceeding X amount each month.” For Abe, reaching a specific monetary goal boosted his confidence in his sales ability and enabled him to feel successful in his accomplishment.

The completion of the third statement, “My symbols of success are…,” will enable you to see what tangible results you want to manifest in life. The symbols of success can be anything from a significant bank balance, to an abundance of free time, to fitting into a size ten dress. Be as specific as you can, since your answers will provide clues to the lifestyle that conforms to your overall personal vision of success.

Completing the fourth statement, “I will feel like a success when I…,” gives you the chance to try on your future aspirations to see how they will feel. There is something very powerful about putting “I” in front of all your desires. For example, remember Dana with her dog. It was one thing for her to say that
her definition of success was being able to bring her dog to work. However, by clearly stating “I will feel successful when I am able to bring my dog to work,” she placed herself into her vision. Putting “I” into the statement put herself in the picture and gave her ownership over her wish.

Lastly, while the fifth question, “If I were to write my ideal obituary based on the fact that my life was a success, it would read like this...,” might seem gloomy, it is actually one of the most instrumental and inspiring exercises you can do. Gary Wollin, my personal financial planner, a brilliant man whose life is dedicated to supporting people’s financial goals, asked me to complete this exercise. He finds that when people truly know what they want their lives to be about, they can then have their finances support their intentions.

I notice that many people put off doing this exercise because it confronts them with the reality of their mortality. I have found, conversely, that when you really examine your life head-on that you can be painfully honest about what you want to accomplish throughout your life. It is a bit uncomfortable writing down big dreams because they may sound highly ambitious or self-aggrandized, but unless you allow yourself to imagine your ideal life, you can never begin to make it happen. Imagining yourself at the end of your life looking back is a helpful tool to be able to articulate what it is that you hope to accomplish during your lifetime.

Find a comfortable, quiet place where you can focus without distractions. Begin by writing or typing your life story as it reads up to this moment. Write it
in the past tense, and in third person. For example, “He was born in…” and so on. Include all the relevant moments, accomplishments, events, and experiences that have contributed to your development up until now.

The second part should begin as of tomorrow, and move forward from that point until the day you die. This, too, should be written in the past tense, since it is, after all, your obituary. Write it as if all your dreams came true, and you fulfilled all of your heart’s desires. Make this obituary the most meaningful, powerful expression of your fulfilled life. Include anything and everything that you can imagine yourself doing, and include some items that you cannot quite envision but might like to in a perfect world. Here is the place to break out of the “oh, I could never” trap and allow your imagination and ambitions to run wild.

While you are writing, don’t edit or judge what you write. Rather put every wish, hope, dream, goal or aspiration down on paper as they come to you. Later you can edit what you wrote if you choose. After you are finished, look closely at what you said you did with your life and ask yourself if this is what you would like to become the reality. If it isn’t, revise your obituary as you like (that’s the beauty of writing it while you are still alive!). When you are satisfied with it, put it in a place where you can reread it on a regular basis and begin to strategize how you will make it come true.

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The most defining description there is about success is that it cannot be universally interpreted. Each person has their own vision of what it means to succeed and what it means to be successful, which is every bit as personal and unique as their thumbprint. The secret to achieving your own success is to search your heart for what matters to you and to set the standard of what you aspire to. Armed with that knowledge, your chances of succeeding at or in whatever you desire multiply a thousandfold. You can take the courageous leap onto your path and begin the journey towards personal fulfillment and, ultimately, the satisfying life you deserve.