

What is the recipe for success?

A young colleague asked me the other day: “What makes the difference between those who achieve success and those who don’t?” With this question, he was just referring to financial success. Before we try to answer this question, I think it might be worthwhile to point out the obvious and that is that financial success or success in any one area of your life does not necessarily mean you have a successful life.

For what it's worth, here is my perception (formed by my own experience and the teachings of those who were able to achieve great success in their respective fields) of what it takes to be successful in anything you take on.

Self-discipline:

Without self-discipline, you will struggle to achieve any noteworthy level of success. Self-discipline is the ability to do what must be done, even if it is hard or unpleasant. It is saving that 15% of your income while you would rather spend it on a new car, it is waking up in the cold and dark to go jogging while everyone else is still warm in bed, it is saying no to cheesecake with your coffee even though it is your favorite, or going in to work on a Saturday to catch up on your work while your friends are watching the rugby.

People who are very successful in one area of life (like their career) and who show tremendous self-discipline in this area can also be unsuccessful in another area (like maintaining a healthy weight). Think about it, the only reason this person is struggling to maintain a healthy weight is simply because they fail to be self-disciplined in this area. This brings me to the next requirement for success.

Focus and meaning:

Highly successful people have an almost obsessive focus on what they do. Without this, reaching exceptional levels of success is highly unlikely. Let's be honest with each other: **You can never achieve anything exceptional with an average attempt.**

If you think you will reach the top of your industry by keeping to normal working hours, become a top athlete by keeping to the minimum required exercise, lose weight without ever having to say no to junk food or become wealthy without spending less than you earn and giving intense attention to your finances then you are seriously mistaken. To maintain this level of attention and focus, what you are doing has to be important to you and have meaning. This is also why many business coaches will tell you to do what you are passionate about or what makes you happy. They realize that it is hard to go the extra mile for a career that you are not passionate about. If your job is merely a way to put food on the table and it is not something you really enjoy, then I almost want to go out on a limb and say that you will never be anything more than average therein.

For example, being crazy about golf and even having a natural talent for it is not even close to enough to make a living out of it. It takes obsessive focus and extremely hard work. This principle works for almost anything I can think of. I am afraid however that this is something that was lost in the upbringing of most millennials. “You have to work smart, not hard,” they will tell you. My answer to this is usually, “Good luck with that”.

Feel free to contact the Author, should you have any questions or comments on this month's article in the TwoCents.

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Responsibility:

Successful people do not complain or blame. It is the attitude of “losers”. These people simply do not take responsibility for anything. Their circumstances are always as a result of external factors. The fact that there was discrimination against your parents based on their skin color or that they lost their jobs after 1994 due to affirmative action is a shame. Some people use these events to have an excuse for why they never reached what they could have. Other people use this as motivation to help them work even harder to make something of themselves in the future. Be careful of what you say. If you find yourself making excuses or blaming other people or events for the circumstances in which you find yourself, you are not on a path to success. Take responsibility for your life, no-one else can. In most cases the situations that people find themselves in are not completely hopeless, they are simply not willing to do what needs to be done to make it better.

Action:

Successful people act. You can make wonderful plans all your life but at some point, you will have to act. Many people make the mistake of expecting to have certainty over the outcome before they are willing to act. You can speak to any successful person and they will tell you that they had an idea or a plan before their journey started but they never knew exactly how they would get there. It was important enough to them, they were willing to work hard, to take responsibility for things when it went wrong and pick themselves up and try again when they failed. If you have to see the finish line before you are willing to start the marathon then you will never take the first step. Take that very first step and then just put one foot in front of the other.

The above is, in my opinion, 4 of the most important characteristics of successful people. There are many more characteristics and a lot of literature on the subject should you want to know more. If you are not exactly where you would like to be today and you think that it might be too late for you, just remember that Colonel Sanders (founder of KFC) only became successful in his late 50's and was perceived to be a failure for most of his life.

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