

RE-DEFINING SUCCESS

BY

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For as far back as most of us can remember, success has been defined in performance terms, most notably economic. As men we heard our parents say, “So and so is very successful, you should see the car he just bought.” To the women these parents would say, “She married well and you should see the car he bought her.” When we were in school success was measured by our Grade Point Average. Most of our lives have been dominated by the notion that in order to be successful we had to have the trappings of success. Our success was to be measured by some objective criteria: grades, money, power (power is often money), or possessions. I propose that this definition of success has outlived its usefulness and should be changed. I further suggest that to adhere to such a narrow definition of success is harmful to our mental health and can be destructive to a society.

When we look back to the 1980s we can see just how far people will go to be “successful.” Donald Trump, Michael Milken, Charles Keating, Donald Spiegel, to mention a few, all wanted to be successful. Our society thought they were geniuses. We revered these people because they amassed large fortunes. We admired them because they could manipulate vast amounts of money. We didn’t concern ourselves with their values, their morals, their attitudes. We were only concerned with their wealth. These people, and others like them, became the models of success. These were the people we wanted to emulate, and we hoped that our children would identify with them.

In previous generations we identified with various leaders, such as presidents, politicians, heads of corporations, and the like. And then came their collapse. A president was impeached, senators were found guilty of graft, the head of the FBI was corrupt and abused his power, corporate heads were found guilty of fraud and embezzlement.

I cannot remember a time in history when so many icons of respect fell from grace. For men, this leaves a vacuum of idols. There are no models left. Even our sports heroes, in their quest for material gain or power, have been found guilty of unethical and illegal behavior. Pete Rose was guilty of violating the rules of baseball, and Mike Tyson was found guilty of rape. Where are men to turn for their models? What values should these models have? What are the appropriate criteria for a model of success?

By contrast, contemporary women have a great many models with whom to identify. Unfortunately, however, many women are using the same criteria for success that men have historically used: power and money. By emulating men, women will end up in the same place that men have ended up. We are already seeing an increase in heart disease among women, a decrease in the discrepancy in mortality between men and women, i.e., women are not living as long as they had been, and a general increase in the number of cases of what has commonly been thought of as “male illnesses.” Such stress-related illness as ulcers, hypertension, heart disease, as well as addictions to alcohol, drugs, and cigarettes, all of which have been traditionally male problems, are becoming increasingly common in women.

Stress and Success

The human immune system is affected by stress; thus we are more susceptible to illness under stress. The stress of trying to live up to external standards of success and achievement in an overly

competitive world is one of the primary stresses of contemporary life. Learning to refocus and redefine what constitutes success would go a long way toward reducing the amount of stress we experience.

Defining oneself by external standards such as material goods, status, wealth, income, and the size of one's home leaves us vulnerable to stress, since we are always concerned with losing these attainments. And what is enough? How much of each makes for success? And if someone has more, is s/he more successful? By putting our measure of success on external variables, we are giving up control of our lives and our sense of self. We have no control over whether we will lose our job due to cutbacks, lose our wealth due to stock market crashes or recession, or lose our clients, patients, or customers. What happens in event of disability? Is it really "success" when one has minimal family life, few friends, no hobbies, no interests other than work, minimal social life, no recreational life, limited community involvement, and no spiritual life?

An Alternative Model

Perhaps a more appropriate definition of success would include a balance of all of the above. We are all born with a certain set of genetically determined, biological givens. From that point onward we have varying degrees of control over our sense of self or what we might call our identity or self-concept. Picture a series of concentric circles moving from a small circle in the center to increasingly larger circles as you move outward, similar to a bulls-eye. The center is your genetic composition, followed in order by:

- (genetics & biology)
- 1. attitudes, values, & beliefs
- 2. awareness, knowledge, & insight
- 3. physical care, exercise, & appearance
- 4. diet & nutrition
- 5. spiritual awareness
- 6. hobbies & recreation
- 7. family relationships
- 8. friendships
- 9. community involvement
- 10. career & employment
- 11. financial & economics

The closer to the center of the bulls-eye, e.g., 1, 2, 3, etc., the more immediate control we have and the fewer contingencies involved. We have greater control of numbers 1 - 6 than 7 - 11. As we move from the center outward we have less control.

If your identity is based on your finances or career, for example, you have less control than those who define themselves by their attitudes and beliefs. If you define yourself by the money you make as a lawyer, for instance, and you lose clients and the public's view of lawyers diminishes, then your self-concept will take a significant drop. If, on the other hand, you define yourself by the good deeds you do or by your values, no one can take these away and your self-concept will remain constant.

As I pointed out earlier, people who define themselves by their jobs live a very precarious existence. Once they retire, by choice or otherwise, or lose their job through economic changes, these individuals often feel at a loss. They experience feelings of worthlessness, depression, anger, and a loss of self-worth.

Rather than the definition being defined by society, this alternative point of view suggests that we should define success according to the degree to which we achieve our own balance of priorities. The more elements that go into the formula, the less vulnerable one is to failure since no one element alone comprises our self-concept. If we define success as solely based on financial achievement, for example, our self-image will go up and down at the whim of the economy.

I am reminded of the two types of balls I used to play with as a youth. One was made out of solid sponge rubber and it was virtually indestructible. Cars could run over it and dogs could chew it, and though bruised or chipped, it would still bounce. The other ball was hollow, but a very high bouncer, and hence the ball of choice. However, if it got punctured it would quickly go flat or even split in half. The mortality rate for the hollow ball was very high. By building our self-concept based on a solid center, we might not be as glamorous or flashy as the person who builds a self-concept based on power or money, but we are likely to be more durable.

Self-concept and Success

There are two issues here: one has to do with having greater control over our self-concept, and the other relates to a new definition of success. By defining our self-concept in terms of values, self-awareness, spirituality, hobbies, etc., we have more control since these are less affected by contingency than finance and career. That is, we have greater control over the values we will adhere to than we have over economic conditions in the world. We might consider this as having an “inner-directedness” rather than an “outer-directedness.” A self-concept based on inner-directedness is similar to having a solid core that can withstand adversity. On the other hand, a self-concept based on outer-directedness leaves us with a hollow core and less able to deal with adversity.

A positive self-concept is the foundation for success on the job, not the other way around. We have control over our self-concept since we can take action that directly affects how we feel about ourselves. There are certain aspects of our lives that we are more able to control than others. We can control the extent to which we live up to our values, we can strive toward accomplishing our goals, we can make a contribution to our community, we can take care of our bodies and our minds, we can develop a social and spiritual consciousness that keeps us connected to the world around us, and we can develop hobbies and interests that enrich our lives. With these attributes as the foundation of our self-concept, we are more able to function effectively on our jobs. Our jobs do not define us.

Your self-concept is how you think about yourself, your ideas about who you are. If you define yourself narrowly you will be more vulnerable to depression and anxiety. If your entire self-concept is based on being a parent, you will feel at a loss when your children grow up and leave the home. If your self-concept is based on your career then retirement will be difficult since you will lose the basis of your identity.

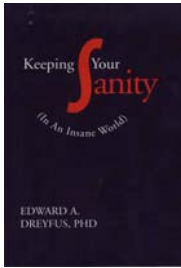
It is often difficult to change your self-concept. It takes time and effort. Often we need help. Our concept of self begins to develop during childhood and is resistant to change. We learn what is expected of us first from our parents, then from friends, and in school. Society contributes to our self-concept when it defines boys as potential fathers and workers, and girls as mothers and homemakers, and when it defines success in terms of wealth, power, and accomplishment. We internalize these values and begin to define ourselves in similar ways.

In order to change our self-concept we have to take charge of our life. We have to decide what is important to us and what constitutes success. *Your* success depends on how *you* balance your priorities. Success can only be understood in terms of each person’s individual formula for success. Most of us have never given it a moment’s thought—we merely accepted what was handed to us. *Success begins*

with personal empowerment, taking charge over that which we can control and accepting that which we cannot.

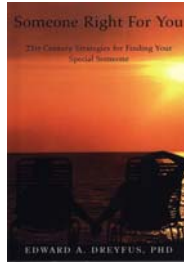
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