



## Success: An Exploration

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### Abstract

*Success, in a worldly sense or by societal yardstick, is mostly evaluated in terms of money, status, recognition, fame, promotions, awards, rewards, and similar criteria. The purpose of this study was to explore the concept of success as viewed by people who were considered successful in their respective fields by societal yardstick or in a worldly sense. Further, the study aimed at exploring what led to their success.*

*Six successful people from varied fields such as dance, architecture, sports, industry, academics, and medicine were included in the sample. They were interviewed to explore their concept of success, background, struggles, and factors that led to their success.*

*The findings revealed that success was viewed differently by different people. Whatever their field, these successful people had a few things in common. The implications of the study were discussed.*

## Success: An Exploration

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Success! Who doesn't want it? A million-dollar question to most people is how to become successful. The issue – why some people are able to succeed while others are not – has been of keen interest for many years. But what does success mean?

### **Success: It's Meaning**

Success mostly connotes a comparison. If a person has done better than others in his or her field or area of specialization, (s)he may be considered successful. Berglas (1986) stated, "Evaluating a person as "successful" indicates that the person has more of a desired attribute than other persons in the group". The difference between 'achieving' success and 'being' a success has also been made. What it means is that to be successful, having a higher ranking in relevant comparison group is necessary but at the same time it is important that the person has had achieved the desired outcome. Having something more by birth may not mean success.

Scholars have emphasized the 'achievement' aspect of success. Huber (1971) remarked, "What is success...? ...You had to know where a man began and where he ended to determine how far he had come" (p.1). Success may be viewed as the distance between one's origin and one's final achievement (Korda, 1977).

Further, the difference between achievement and success has also been made. "Whereas achievement refers to valued accomplishments, success lays the emphasis upon rewards. ...Thus, success is still not a primary criterion of value in its own right, but rather a derivative reward *for* active, instrumental performance" (Williams, cited in Mizruchi, 1964, p. 74).

Darvas (1967) divided the term success into three categories – personal success, public success, and personal-public success. Darvas defined personal success as "the achievement of an inner satisfaction in one's own life not dependent on recognition by society"; public success as "the attainment of wealth, favour, or eminence as generally recognized by society"; and personal-public success as "the achievement of an inner contentment coupled with recognition by society" (p. 26).

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Let us examine how dictionaries define success. Dictionaries define success as achievement of what is aimed at. This is fine. Achievement of what is aimed at may be considered as success. However, who should decide what should be aimed at? The 'individual' in question or 'society'?

Success of an individual is mostly evaluated by societal yardsticks. An 'external' person or agency passes judgement on an individual whether (s)he is successful or a failure. Material reward is one of the criteria most frequently used in evaluating success. People equate success with money. It is a very common question that if a person is smart, how come he does not possess money (Berglas, 1986). Mizruchi (1964) explored conception of success by asking 179 respondents about the characteristics associated with success or signs of success. It was found that 49 per cent respondents stressed factors associated with good reputation in the community, 35 per cent emphasized factors associated with the accumulation of material goods and security, and only 16 per cent described success in terms of factors associated with family welfare and happiness. In addition to money or material worth, status, recognition, fame, promotions, awards, rewards, and similar criteria are used in evaluating success in the worldly sense. To measure executive success, some of the criteria that have been used are number of promotions, salary relative to age, recognition, awards, and rewards (Ansari, Baumgartel & Sullivan, 1982; Dunnette, 1967; England & Lee, 1974; Ryan, Watson & Williams, 1981; Watson & Williams, 1977).

However, someone who is considered successful by societal yardstick or by an external agency may or may not consider himself/herself successful. Similarly, someone considered a failure by an external agency or by a societal yardstick may or may not consider himself/herself a failure.

In the recent past, efforts have been made to explore the notion of subjective success. That is, success is subjective as it might mean different things to different people. Tarnowieski (1973) summarized a survey of businessmen who were asked to identify success in their own terms. The list of definitions included goal achievement, happiness, job satisfaction, and job and financial security. Some of the recent studies (Kaur, 1992; Gupta, 1999) have confirmed the notion of subjective success. Gupta (1999) explored the views executives hold about their success from their own perspective and found seven definitions of success. The definitions identified were as follows: Omnibus Success, "Own People" Success Archetype, Excellent Work Life, Comfortable Living, Leadership and Power, Job Prestige and Stability, and Patriotism and Altruism. Thus it can very well be argued that success is whatever an individual thinks it is.

### **What Makes People Successful?**

Are successful people born or made is a controversial issue. What makes someone successful? It has been of interest to researchers and professionals for long time to identify the factors related to success.

Berglas (1986) made an attempt to explore why some people can and do accept success when it becomes available. He found that personality traits such as social skills and interpersonal ease were central determinants in the business world. Luck, good connections, timings, etc. were also found to be important in determining success. However, the most crucial key to success was a sense of positive self-esteem. "Thousands of people are exposed to golden opportunities in their life-time but the person who can capitalize on those opportunities that knock once or several times is the one who has inner sense of confidence in his competence to convert possibilities into successful products. Because of the high regard he has experienced in the past, the person with positive self-esteem has the psychological energy to pursue his goal impediments, frustrations, and other limitations (Berglas, 1986, p. 71).

Benjamin Franklin, who was the most influential successful apostle for Americans, preached success as the attainment of wealth or prominence (Anthony & Kleiner, 1987). "And according to Franklin, the attainment of material worth and prominence is the result of virtue. Virtue in turn is defined as self-sacrifice and hard work" (Anthony & Kleiner, 1987, p. 10).

A variety of factors such as hard work, drive, etc. have been identified as important in success. Scholars (Dunnette, 1967; Collins & Lankenner, 1983) have offered a number of suggestions on what matters in becoming successful. Rassam (1988) examined the success stories of thirty-eight top entrepreneurs of Britain.

There have been studies on managerial success. Scholars have attempted to identify the skills, behaviors and attributes possessed by successful executives. Yet little is known of what makes people successful. Probably many more efforts are needed to say something in definite terms.

## **Early Years**

The literature suggests that early experiences, childhood environment, and the socialization process have significant impact on a person's life.

Many definitions of the term socialization exist in the literature. Socialization has been defined as the "processes by which people selectively acquire the values and attitudes, the interests, skills and knowledge, in short the culture of groups of which they are, or seek to become, a member" (Merton, 1957). Straus and Nelson (1968) defined socialization as "the process by which persons take on the language and the culture of their social setting. Although socialization is continuous through the life span of an individual, the bulk of learning occurs in childhood and adolescence. It is at this time that basic cultural products are transmitted across generations, so that the young can acquire the wisdom of society without having to invent for themselves a language, a code of behavior, or any other past innovation" (p. 123).

Sigmund Freud (1924/1968) argued that the self is developed during the early stages of life and almost little or no significant change occurs as an individual becomes an adult. Freud emphasized the importance of the first five years in one's life. Zigler and Child (1969) emphasized the role of childhood socialization and child rearing practices on children's developmental patterns.

Is there a relationship between the experiences of early years and later life? It was thought fruitful to explore what kind of childhood environment the successful people had had.

### **Modeling**

People learn a lot through the process of modeling or identification. Brenner defined identification as "the act or process of becoming like something or someone in one or several aspects of thought or behavior" (cited in Bush & Simons, 1981, p. 137). Through the process of identification, an individual imbibes some of the desired qualities or characteristics of the model. Jones and Gerard (1967) defined identification as "the general process whereby the attributes of another are internalized by the one" (p. 105).

Most people report having role models in their lives, someone they are/were influenced by, someone they admired and looked up to, someone they tried to emulate. Who were the role models of the successful people, and what qualities did they admire in their role models or what qualities or values they tried to imbibe was thought worth exploring.

### **Price of Success**

Literature (Boyd & Gumpert, 1983; Grieff & Munter, 1980; Maccoby, 1976) indicates that success costs some price and that price is usually in terms of the deterioration of one's private life, increased stress, self-doubt, loss of emotional feeling, decreased ability to relate to others, etc. Interviews of successful young executives and their wives revealed great feelings of stress, a loss of personal alertness, and an increasing sense of meaninglessness in everyday activities (Bartolome, 1972).

Bartolome and Evans (1983) found that there was a boundary between work and private life, and private life rarely interfered with work but work often interfered with private life. They termed this interference "spillover". They reported that there were executives who were able to successfully bridge the gap between their jobs and private lives. These executives were found to be doing three things better than other executives – they could adapt well to a change in job, they could find the right job, and they could handle career disappointments well.

Anthony and Kleiner (1987) examined the costs in terms of time, stress and effects on one's family involved in the pursuit of wealth and status. They found that in general the price of success was not as high as it was often suspected.

Is it true that successful people necessarily have to pay a price and that is mostly in terms of the deterioration of their private lives?

## **The Present Study**

Early work of the present investigator had indicated that success means different things to different executives. The present study aimed at exploring the concept of success as viewed by people who were considered successful in their respective fields by societal yardstick or in a worldly sense. Further, it aimed at exploring what led to their success. This study is a part of an ongoing effort to understand the concept of success.

### **Methodology**

#### *Sample and Procedure*

Six persons from varied walks of life who were considered as successful in their respective fields in a worldly sense or by societal yardstick were included in the sample.

It was decided to include only Ahmedabad-based people in the sample. The investigator had decided to include respondents from the following fields: dance, architecture, sports, industry, academics, and medicine. There was nothing sacrosanct about these fields. The idea was to have a range of fields.

A few colleagues were informally asked to name some of the successful people from the fields of dance, architecture, sports, industry, academics, and medicine. They were also asked to specify the criteria on the basis of which they were considering them successful. The criteria used by them were as follows: recognition, fame, good reputation, status, accomplishments, and awards. The names mentioned by a majority of them from each of the above-listed fields were included in the sample. Fortunately, all of them agreed to participate in the study.

Respondents were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. Responses were sought on the following aspects: personal definition of success; the childhood environment and family; role models, and the specific qualities of role models they admired and tried to emulate; achievements as perceived by them; crises or failures, and how those were handled; perceptions about their own self; price, if any, they had to pay for success; and key factors that led to their success. These aspects were selected on the basis of a review of literature

and experiences gathered during pre-pilot study that suggested their importance in understanding the dynamics of success.

Each interview took about an hour and a half. The interviews were video-recorded. Except one, all the interviews were conducted in 2001.

### *Analysis*

Transcripts were made of the data collected from the interviews and data were organized into categories such as success, early years, family, selection of career, achievements, failures, crises, role models, as persons, price paid, factors responsible for success, following the footsteps of successful people, and the future. Profiles and responses of each respondent on various categories appeared under the heading, *Case Studies of Successful People* (Gupta, 2003).

## **Discussion**

Respondents' journey to success reflected an in-depth insight into the dynamics of success. Various aspects of their journey were described in length in each of the case studies (Gupta, 2003). Let us examine some of the aspects covered in this study.

### *Success: The Concept*

It was argued that success is a subjective concept. Success might mean different things to different individuals. The view people hold about their own success may or may not match with societal yardsticks.

A close look at the way respondents defined success revealed that success meant different things to different people. Broadly, success was defined in terms of being able to do what one wanted to do. However, what each of these successful people wanted to do was different. For one, success meant changing people's lives. For another, it meant happiness. And still others defined success in terms of achieving benchmark standards; doing things differently; curiosity, originality and significance; and keep setting newer (higher) goals and reaching those goals. Also, the respondents gave much emphasis on doing what they thought they should be doing.

Thus it may be said that 'success' is subjective. People are likely to define success differently. Further, personal definition of success of an individual may not necessarily match with the societal definition of success. For example, terms such as money, status, awards etc. did not appear in the personal definitions of these successful people. The point that is being made here is that it is important to acknowledge that people do not necessarily work towards getting something that society acknowledges as success.



It was interesting to note that all the respondents perceived themselves as successful according to their personal definition of success though there was some variation on the extent to which they viewed themselves as successful according to their personal definition.

### *Childhood Environment (Early Years)*

There are studies indicating the significant and long lasting impact of the way an individual was brought up during the early years of his/her life, the treatment and messages that (s)he got from parents and significant others, and the way (s)he was socialized.

An attempt was made to explore what kind of childhood environment these successful people have had. The findings indicated that none of the respondents had pressure from their parents to come to the top or to stand first or hold a rank in the school or college! There was a mix of support, autonomy, and discipline in their childhood environment.

Evidences suggest that family, and especially parental behavior, have important consequences for the child. For example, parental support combined with authoritative control was found to be having the most favorable socialization effects on the child, i.e., development of high self-esteem, sense of competence, conscience, internalization of adult standards, and high achievement motivation (Gecas, 1981). Further, middle class families, compared to lower class families, were found to be having socialization values that emphasize autonomy and individual development (Gecas, 1981).

The extent to which it can be said that environment plays an important role in one's later life, it may be assumed that childhood environment characterized by a mix of support, autonomy, and discipline played a significant role in making these people successful.

### *Selection of Career*

How and when these successful people made a choice about the career or profession they thought of pursuing?

On examining this aspect, it was found that the respondents were not very clear or sure in their early years as to which career or profession to get into. Some initially wanted to get into a profession different than what they finally got into. However, once they decided what they wanted to do, they worked hard and gave their best, and they enjoyed what they did.

### *As Persons*

One might wonder what kind of individuals these successful people are. What special characteristics or qualities do they possess that made them successful?

Transparency, trusting others, commitment, hard work, persistence, positive attitude, thinking big, and independence of thought and action were some of the characteristics that the respondents seemed to be possessing as a group. Here again there was variation in terms of the characteristics emphasized by each of them. However, hard work and persistence appeared to be common in all of them. Possessing the characteristics mentioned above might increase one's probability to succeed.

Further, they seemed to be having interests outside their work. One enjoyed writing poetry, another enjoyed reading history etc., and still another liked to watch nature.

### *Role Models*

All the respondents had role models that influenced them.

However, the qualities the respondents admired in their role models were different. One admired doing what one believes in; and another admired humility and *karma*. Still others admired stoicism, doing your bit, and honesty; thinking big, trusting others, courage and conviction; rigor; and focus. The role models that these successful people had, and the qualities they admired in their role models probably indicated what qualities they considered as important. It may be said that they chose models, which possessed the qualities that they considered as important.

How do people choose models they would like to identify with, and thereby emulate some of their characteristics has been an area of interest to scholars. Shaw and Costanzo (1985) contended that models that are similar, powerful, attractive, friends, loved ones, previously rewarding others, and whose activities are distinctive, salient, and complex are likely to be paid more attention to.

### *Crises or Failures*

The path to success is seldom free of problems. On the way to success, one faces a number of obstacles, problems, and challenges. Hickerson (1962) argued that if someone has never had a bump, a temporary failure, or a setback, he has probably not set his goal high enough.

However, the issue that was thought important to explore was how successful people perceived and faced their crises and failures. The findings indicated that

problems, obstacles, or failures were seen by the respondents as challenges or opportunities to do better.

The ability to learn from and deal with failures may be said to be very important. The literature suggests that failure to learn from experience might result in career disappointment. Zaleznik (1967) suggested two things as necessary to cope well with disappointment: the ability to become intimately acquainted with one's own emotional reactions, and the capacity to face the disappointment squarely. He added, "The temptation and the psychology of individual response to disappointment is to avoid the pain of self-examination. If an avoidance pattern sets in, the individual will pay dearly for it later. Usually, avoidance occurs because this mode of response is the individual's habitual way of dealing with disappointment from childhood days on. It also seems clear that those people who are lucky enough to have learned from childhood days how to face loss are best equipped to deal with the personal issues that arise during experiences with disappointment in the executive career" (p. 68). Hickerson (1962) stressed that to be successful, you must be able to profit from failure. Knowing how to handle the bumps is an outstanding trait of successful men.

### *Price of Success*

Most respondents did mention the compromises they made in their personal lives because of their work commitments. Examples were given of not being able to attend children's school functions or not being present when the spouse and children were unwell or not being able to spend enough time with children, which indicated that at times their personal lives got disturbed. They did feel bad whenever their family had to suffer because of their pre-occupation. However, it did not emerge as a serious issue for them.

Most of them had realized that their personal life is very important, and they must have a balance. Further, it may be noted that all the respondents reported having excellent support from their families.

### *Factors Responsible for Success*

What really led these people to reach the place where they have reached? Some of the factors mentioned by them as important in their success were privilege, God's grace, God's gift, luck, or opportunities.

Additionally, some others factors emerged as important, such as positive attitude and the attitude of living in the present; core competence, focus, a positive attitude and big dreams; hard work and persistence; and connection to the grass-root level.

## ***Goals Ahead***

Though the respondents considered themselves as successful, success was viewed as an ongoing process. The respondents had significant plans ahead.

## ***Following the Footsteps of Successful People***

If one could become successful by following the footsteps of successful people, there would probably be no one unsuccessful in the world, of course, provided that the desire to follow was there.

All respondents very clearly remarked that success cannot be wholly or blindly duplicated or emulated. The respondents pointed out that one could definitely learn from successful people. However, one would eventually have to develop one's own path.

## **Limitations of the Study**

The study had the following limitations because of which findings need to be treated with caution especially for generalization purposes.

- The study covered successful people only from Ahmedabad.
- Only one person from each of the selected fields was included in the sample.
- The sample was small.

## **Summing Up**

The purpose of this study was to explore the concept of success as viewed by people who were considered successful in their respective fields by societal yardstick or in a worldly sense. Further, the study aimed at gaining insight into what led to their success. Six successful people from varied fields such as dance, architecture, sports, industry, academics, and medicine were included in the sample.

The findings revealed that success was viewed differently by different people. Broadly, success was defined in terms of being able to do what one wanted to do. However, what each of these successful people wanted to do was different. Also, the respondents gave much emphasis on doing what they thought they should be doing. Thus, it may be concluded that the concept of success is subjective. And it is important to acknowledge that personal definition of success of an individual may not necessarily match with the societal definition of success.

Whatever their field, these successful people had a few things in common. All respondents perceived themselves as successful according to their personal

definition of success though there was some variation on the extent to which they viewed themselves as successful. There was a mix of support, autonomy, and discipline in their childhood environment. They were not very clear or sure about the choice of their career or profession during the early years of their lives. However, once they decided what they wanted to do, they worked hard and gave their best, and they enjoyed what they did. In terms of characteristics, hard work and persistence appeared to be common in all of them. They had role models. However, the qualities they admired in their role models were different. They viewed problems or obstacles as challenges or opportunities to do better. The ability to bounce back from failures and obstacles was evident. Success does not necessarily have costs in terms of private life. Most respondents did mention the compromises they had made at times in their personal lives because of their work commitments. However, it did not emerge as a serious issue for them. One thing that emerged as significant was the importance of a supportive family. They were getting excellent support from their families. Some of the factors mentioned by them as important in their success were privilege, God's grace, God's gift, luck, or opportunities.

As far as the age profile of respondents was concerned, the youngest one was about 40 years old and the oldest 70 plus. Whatever their age, they were pursuing their goals with enthusiasm and energy. They were looking forward to working towards and achieving the goals that they had set for themselves according to their personal definition of success. This probably indicates that success might be viewed as an ongoing process. As Schuller (1989) contended, success is never ending because success is a process. Uris viewed success as a journey. "The concept of success as a journey suggests that you must have direction in which your motivation moves you. This direction must have several qualities, such as it must be uniquely your own, it must be achievable and it must be what you want" (Uris, 1969).

The findings also suggested that every one would have to evolve one's own path to success. One might not become successful by following or duplicating the path of successful people. Uris (1969) argued that the 'footstep theory', that is, just following in the footsteps of a successful person does not work because the specific circumstances surrounding a particular individual are unique and cannot be duplicated. One, of course, could learn from role models.

Success is something that is desirable for individuals as well as for organizations and society. The findings have implications for aspirants of success.

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