

I WANT TO BE MORE
SUCCESSFUL

I want to be more successful

We're often taught that success defines us. As children we're weaned on the notion that our self-worth is dependent on how successful we are.

When we do something successfully we are praised: 'good boy,' we're told when we answer a question right; 'good girl', they say when we pet the long-suffering cat more gently.

It's no surprise, then, that you're here trying to find out how to be a success, but before we go any further it's worth reassessing what that really means.

What to do

Don't be a success, do successful things

Don't brand yourself as a success or a failure by what you achieve.

Forget the winning formula

People who don't succeed are often just as driven as those who do.

Clarify your values

Set goals according to the kind of person you'd like to be.

Actualise

Make success a pleasant by-product of self-actualisation.

Don't wait for inspiration

Get inspired on the job, not from your living room.

Take action

A great product needs a great idea, and then a lot of hard work.

Do things, tell people.

Sell yourself. Let the world know your great idea.

Take responsibility

Claim ownership of your successes and your failings.

Don't be a success, do successful things

As a human, you will have done good things and bad things in your life. Maybe you succeeded in getting As in your GCSEs, and since failed in a professional capacity somewhere.

You can't be said, therefore, to be either wholly a success or wholly a failure – you've done successful things and you've done unsuccessful things.

Let's explore the importance of this distinction. Think of a person whom popular opinion considers evil – Hitler, Pol Pot, Stalin, etc.

Do a bit of research into that person's history – their childhood, their relationships, what they did before they were infamous.

Look for any evidence of tenderness, positive deeds or likeable traits, and make a list of them. (Hitler, for example, was lovingly devoted to his mother).

Humanistic psychologists such as Carl Rogers argue that if we are able to recognise that good deeds have been done by even the most evil individuals, then it follows that no one can be totally evil.

We can co-opt this logic when we talk about success and failure. Labeling yourself a success or a failure is a dangerously absolutist way of thinking, because our whole being becomes defined by what we've done or haven't done.

Is it not much more healthy (and human) to concede that as success is tenuous and liable to change, no person can ever really be an absolute success?

Why is this a good thing? Because it means we can't be absolute failures either. We can (and will) fail, but our whole lives can't be defined by those acts.

So, in your efforts to do more successful things, cut yourself a bit of slack and let yourself fail sometimes.

Forget the winning formula

Bookshop shelves are packed with bestselling self-help guides extolling the qualities possessed by all successful people. There are even self-help guides about how to write successful self-help guides.

And they all seem to agree that successful people are:

ambitious	tenacious
frugal	assertive
willing to take risks	passionate
self-motivated	

Be more like them, we're told, and you're more likely to succeed.

But because so much self-development literature only focuses on successful people, they tend to miss the glaring fact that unsuccessful people are just as likely to possess these qualities.

It's called the survivor bias - analysis focuses only on those that have survived or succeeded.

A failure doesn't necessarily fail because they lack any of the above, they fail because they did stupid things, or made bad decisions, or just because they're - well - human.

People often fail, in fact, because they are far too ambitious, frugal, assertive, passionate, etc.

So breathe easy and stop chasing the elixir, because there is no winning formula which defines success.

Clarify your values

Any journey to success should begin with a clarifying of your values.

Instead of setting goals which you consider the benchmarks of success, make a list of the values which you think drive those goals.

Why do you want that promotion at work? What are your deepest desires for your own behaviour?

Re-write your distant goals into behaviours you can achieve in the present. For example:

Replace 'I will get promoted' with 'I will try to work diligently every day'.

Replace 'I will lose a stone in the next four months' with 'I will try to stick to my exercise plan'.

Replace 'I will have a girlfriend by the end of the year' with 'I will be open and receptive when meeting new people'.

These goal-alternatives are not finite. They aren't achievable in any concrete sense.

But, paradoxically, living by them and abandoning the cyclical and seldom satisfying pursuit of success is more likely to bring about that very thing.

Actualise

American psychologist Abraham Maslow rejected a concrete definition of success, defining it instead as a state of 'self-actualisation': living creatively and using your full potential.

This state sits at the very top of his famous Hierarchy of Needs, and he found examples of it flourishing in people from all walks of life: rich and poor, famous or unknown, textbook 'successful' or otherwise.

To become self-actualised, Maslow posited, you need to do the following:

Have a grip on reality. Exercise good judgement and learn to recognise when you're being spun a yarn.

Accept your flaws. Get to know your imperfections. Contrary to much self-help literature, an 'I can do anything' mentality is rarely helpful.

Be spontaneous. Exercise unprompted expressions of creativity.

Be autonomous. Don't rely on anyone else to dictate your sense of self worth.

Revel in solitude. Entertain yourself. Self-actualisers have healthy relationships with those around them, but also enjoy their own company.

Be empathetic. Learn to see situations from other points of view.

Have a sense of humour. Don't take yourself too seriously.

Whatever your definition of success is, the theory goes, you can meet it by self-actualising – by 'becoming everything that one is capable of becoming', as Maslow said.

Don't wait for inspiration

You know when you're a teenager and you decide that today is the day when you're finally going to come up with that amazing idea that no-one's ever thought of before?

So you sit down and you rub your temples and you say 'think, think, THINK', and nothing comes to you?

That's because creativity and innovation can't always be forced. Most people learn on the job and innovate as they go.

So don't wait for the light bulb moment, because you could be waiting a long time.

Take action

Ever heard someone crane back skeptically from a painting in a gallery and say 'I could have done that'? To them we say 'Maybe you could, but you didn't.' And that's a crucial paradigm shift if you want to get the core of success.

Take an artist like Mondrian. Arguably, the physical execution of his paintings wasn't too complex. Maybe you could do it yourself. But being successful is about so much more than having the right tools.

Likewise, his idea to create non-representational art of black grids and primary colours wasn't totally original. But success is also about more than ideas.

It's about the realisation of ideas, and the relationship between ideas and action. Ideas need realising and realisations need ideas.

Do things, tell people

On a rather unassuming website with a cumbersome domain name (carl.flax.ie/dothingstellpeople.html) student and game developer Carl Lange boldly states 'Do things, tell people. These are the only things you need to do to be successful.' And we think he's got a point.

If Mondrian's paintings were still shrouded in a loft somewhere, the artist wouldn't have been nearly as successful. So follow Lange's advice and make sure you vocalise your endeavours.

Come up with something you can talk about, that you're passionate about - whether a new invention, a business model, or variety of prize-winning marrow.

Attend industry events where there'll be people who are likely to be interested in your thing.

Make contacts. Make friends. Tell people about your thing.

Next time any of those people hear anything related to your thing, the first person they'll think about will be you.

It's less about what you do, Lange argues, and more about 'how you travel the entrepreneurial landscape'.

You could have the biggest marrow known to man, but if you don't wield it skillfully what good will it do you?

Take responsibility

When striving for success, make sure you're prepared to fail.

Write down a list of all your failings in the last year, no matter how minor. Even if it was as simple as getting to work late. Next to each point, write down exactly how you were culpable for that failing.

It might not have been your fault that there were roadworks that morning, but it was still your responsibility to get to work on time.

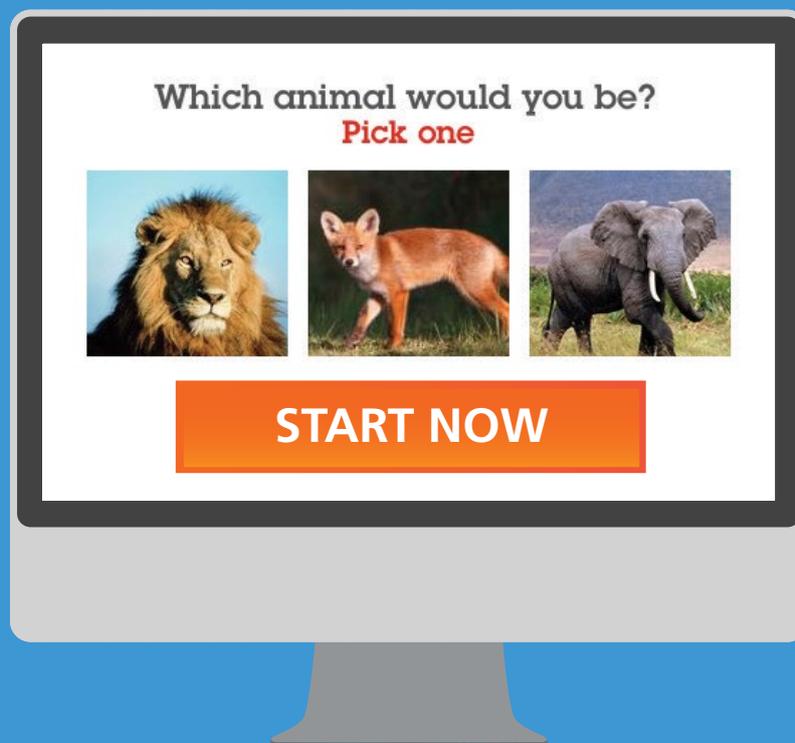
This exercise shouldn't be a downer - remember, you're not a failure just because you fail sometimes.

Rather, it should empower you to take control of your own successes and failings, and emphasise the fact that you're the only person who can ultimately determine them.

Continue your journey

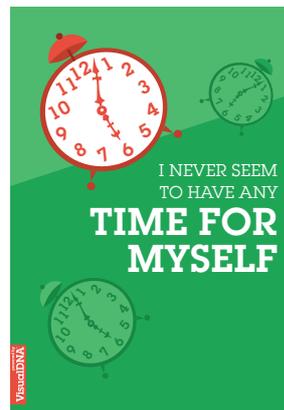
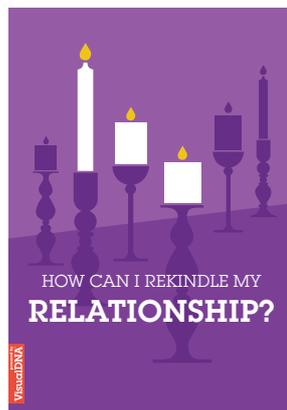
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