

What does it take to be successful?

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By all means, I would not consider myself to be a successful person thus far in my life. Sure I have received some high test scores, earned good grades, was an above average high school quarterback, and am generally well liked and respected. But these things don't make me successful – do they? It is the inherent nature of humans to want to succeed. No one wants to fail. No one wants to have a bad job, a broken marriage, a weak faith or a poor education. Yet some people *are* more successful than others – this is an unarguable fact. So what causes some people to succeed and others to fail? More so, how can a person become successful in their own respective life? Are there common traits in all successful people or are there many ways to obtain the same results? So what gives me the right to write a piece about how to be successful? I am in no position to tell anyone how to achieve success, and throughout this paper I will not attempt to do this. I will, however, use the ideas of others in conjunction with my own thoughts to attempt to come to an understanding of the meaning of success and pinpoint the characteristics that it takes to become successful.

In order to begin this process, I will determine the definition of success. An online dictionary defines success as “the accomplishment of one’s goals” or “the attainment of wealth, position, honors or the like”. For now, I am going to focus on analyzing the second definition of success. In *The Paradox of Success*, John R. O’Neil calls this other type of success “mythic success”, which he defines as “a potent elixir compounded of wealth, power, privilege and freedom from care” (O’Neil 26). This idea of mythic success is one that is blatantly apparent in

the society we live in today. People want to obtain power, prestige and pride. These are traits that they feel make someone successful. And to be fair, this is one way of looking at the idea of success. However, I am going to examine this concept from another angle, from the five areas of life, as defined by myself in conjunction with others' ideas. After reading numerous websites and books dealing with areas of people's lives, I have found that there are many areas that exist. For the simplicity of this piece and in order to attempt to focus the central thoughts of this piece, I have chosen five areas that are relevant to most people. These areas are family, work, school, faith and recreation. Here are the outlines/definitions of the different areas of life:

- **Family:** dealing with relationships between people. This will mainly deal with marriage or dating but this category will also include friendship.
- **Work:** dealing with careers.
- **School:** dealing with how to gain an education.
- **Faith:** dealing with religion or lack of one.
- **Recreation:** dealing with activities that people do for fun. Most of this topic will relate to success in sports but also includes music, arts and more.

Throughout this piece, I am going to examine not only what success is, but how someone can become successful in different areas of their life and if different traits are needed to succeed in different areas. More so, are there any traits that apply to *all* areas of life and if so, are these the most instrumental characteristics required to become successful?

Family:

Success and failure in relationships is something that is experienced by everyone throughout their lives. Roughly 41% of first marriages in the United States end in divorces, with over 60% of second marriages ending in divorce. A key fundamental aspect of being successful in a family or friend setting is happiness. I feel using divorce as a way to measure success is fair but not a perfect evaluation – considering most, but not all, divorces happen because people are not happy together. A study of 1500 marriages by Gary W. Lewandowski Jr. at Monmouth University in New Jersey showed that there are six traits that correspond with marriage success.

These traits include:

- Physical attraction
- Choice to be together
- Shared beliefs, interests and goals
- Communication
- Enjoy being with one another
- Support one another

Other traits that are mentioned in various studies and articles dealing with the concept of success in marriage include trust, honesty and perseverance. The four traits of communication, trust, supportiveness, and perseverance are the traits that were the most frequently mentioned when having successful marriages. These same traits also extended when dealing with

successful friendships. Again, the concept of success in a friendship is most easily determined by the happiness that is received from such a relationship. Since there are “divorces” in friendships, it is a bit tougher to use statistical data to show the success of friendships. However, nearly every single resource dealing with characteristics in successful friendships mentions the four traits of trust, supportiveness, communication and perseverance as critical in the success of a friendship.

Work:

When a person is asked to name someone who they feel is successful, majority of the time the person named is successful in the work area of his or her life. One of the most common ways to define success in one’s career is simply through the amount of money made from one’s job. A more successful person will generally make more money. This does not apply to all careers, however. Some professions, such as a teacher, will not have their impact accurately reflected by their earnings. This dilemma poses a two pronged solution to the definition of success in the work place. Both earnings and impact are crucial when determining the amount of success that a person has in their career. Both of these criteria will be considered when evaluating the traits required to succeed in one’s career.

After reading various online articles that deal with the traits necessary to be successful in the work place, a few similarities began to emerge. These were the four most common traits, with the first and second bullets being emphasized in almost all articles:

- Work extremely hard
- Never give up

- Have a dream
- Believe in themselves

These four concepts can boil down to four words – hardworking, perseverance, dreamer and confidence. In *Profiles of Power and Success* by Gene N. Landrum, Gene chooses fourteen people who he felt were successful in their own lives. Most of the people that he chose had found great success in the work area of their lives. In the summary of his findings, he argues that “high energy is the formula for success” (Landrum 394). He also states that “most were deathly afraid of failure... which manifested itself in what I have termed a “Manic Success Syndrome” (Landrum 394). He describes this concept as the idea that some people become so obsessed with succeeding in their professional fields that they are willing to sacrifice all other things in their lives, including their family, friends and personal well-being. He argues that “it was their instrument of power as well as their tool of self-destruction” (Landrum 394). This concept of wanting to succeed so badly combined with the fear of failure is something that will be discussed later in this piece, as it is instrumental in being successful. Whether it be making lots of money or making an impact in someone’s life, success in the workplace is a combination of the Manic Success Syndrome (which combines hardworking and perseverance), having a dream and belief in one’s own abilities.

School:

For nearly every person in the United States, attendance in school from kindergarten to 12th grade is required and according to The Bureau of Labor Statistics, 66.2% of these high school graduates went on to enroll in colleges. All in all, school will play a large part in most

people's lives. Therefore, learning what it takes to be successful in school is something that is crucial to most people. First, success in school must be defined. The easiest way to define success would be simply through grades, grade point average, standardized test scores and class rank. However, there is more to learning than simply obtaining these measurable criteria. It is just as, if not more important to learn the life skills of hard work, respect, communication and grit that are taught in schools. For the sake of this analysis, I am going to define success in school based on the measurable criteria of grades and test scores. It is important to remember that those other intangible skills do play a role in the overall success gained from school.

One of the resources used when researching the concepts that underlie success in school was *How Children Succeed* by Paul Tough. A large portion of this book deals with a student named Kewauna. Through a program called OneGoal, Kewauna went from being a high school dropout risk to a successful college student. Although she originally had an 11 on her ACT, Kewauna was able to overcome this low score and get into a college. At one point in the book, she credits her success to her inner character trait of perseverance.

I'm never the type to give up. Even when I played hide-and-go-seek when I was little, I would be outside till eight o'clock, until I found everyone. I don't give up on nothing, no matter how hard (Tough 174).

This trait of perseverance is one that is common among those who are successful in school. After compiling a list of common traits that people believe it takes to be successful in school, there were four that appeared the most often:

- Goal orientated

- Proactive
- Perseverance
- Take responsibility for one's own education

Also included in several different articles were more classroom specific concepts such as sitting in the front of class and being able to communicate with one's instructor. Most sources, however, argued that intangible traits were more important in the success of students than intelligence or smarts. In the book *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell, Gladwell gave an interesting critique on IQ and how this idea of natural intelligence can play a role in the success of students. He argued that an IQ of 120 is the maximum IQ that aids a person – anything more provides no additional benefits. This idea of "IQ having a threshold" is one that surprised me when I read this. However, Gladwell offered an idea of practical intelligence, "knowing what to say to whom, knowing when to say it and knowing how to say it for maximum effect" (Gladwell 101). Throughout most of the sources that I researched for this piece, the consensus agreement was that this "practical intelligence" and the traits of perseverance and goal orientated was more important than having a high IQ.

Faith:

Defining success in faith is an incredible challenge. The vast amount of different religions, beliefs and lack of faith make defining success in this area of life nearly impossible. There are several characteristics however that most faith groups will attribute to having a successful faith. Most major religions stress the importance of having a personal relationship with a higher being and a concept of karma. They all share the concept of a final destination

such as heaven as the ultimate goal but will stress that the process of getting to that destination is what matters. Most importantly, the idea of personal happiness and well-being is something that all faiths have in common. As far as how one can be successful in their faith, I am going to leave the definition of success as something that must be self-defined in accordance with one's own personal beliefs and the beliefs of one's accompanying religion, if they choose to be part of one. For most people, this definition will be something along the lines of having a meaningful relationship with their higher being and living a positive, significant life.

There are several characteristics that most people agree are consistent of someone who has a successful faith. This list includes:

- Commitment
- Perseverance
- Sacrifice

With a concept like faith, it is of the uttermost importance to be able to stay committed to one's faith. As David Truman said in his article *Faith and What It Takes*,

Like the wind, we can't see faith, but we can feel it, and we can see its effects on our lives. And, just as the direction and speed of the wind determines the weather, the nature of our faith shapes our destiny.

Faith is a concept that can't be physically seen. But as Truman said, we are able to feel the effects of faith on our lives, which makes it crucial that a person who has a successful faith is able to stay committed to what one believes. It is also critical that a person is able to persevere when things go wrong in their life and are able to continue trusting in their beliefs.

Things will go wrong in life and someone who has a strong and successful faith will be able to overcome these obstacles and continue to believe. People who have the three traits mentioned above will be able to find success in the faith aspect of their lives.

Recreation:

The final pillar of life is the fun or recreational aspect of ones journey. As with everything in life, balancing all parts of life is key. In the recreation section of this piece, I am going to mainly focus on sports, as almost everyone will play some type of sport throughout their lifetime. Also briefly included in the section will be music, the arts and other various hobbies.

So what classifies a person as a successful athlete? Luckily for the sake of this piece, there are plenty of statistical criteria that can be used to determine the success of an athlete, including stats, wins and records. A successful athlete, for the most part, is one who helps his or her team achieve victory and maximizes his or her own abilities. There are several characteristics of successful athletes, not taking into account natural talent. It can be universally agreed upon that in order to be successful in sports, certain natural talent must be had. Natural talent however, is not the only thing that matter when determining the attributes that factor into someone becoming successful in their sport. As said in an online article titled *Rising To The Top – Necessary But Not Sufficient Causes*, "Talent is important, yes, but talent alone is never enough... Talent is a necessary, but not a sufficient cause of success". After looking at successful athletes, coaches and sports analyzers, there is an agreement that there is a set of intangible traits that exist in most successful athletes. This list includes the following traits:

- Confidence in one's own abilities

- Set realistic goals
- Overcome adversity
- Concentration and mental toughness
- Teamwork/Communication
- Competitive nature
- Love of the game

These seven traits were the most common traits associated with successful athletes. Almost every piece mentioned the concepts of love of the game, confidence, competitive and never giving up. The ideas of persevering and not losing confidence in one's own abilities were stressed by many of the athletes that we consider to be successful. A quote from Michael Jordan represents this concept,

I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.

For the most part, the traits of successful athletes fall in line with the traits of someone who is successful in the music or artistic fields. The most successful bands and artists in the world today succeeded because of their talent, self-belief and will to never give up. Bruce Allen credits the success of most musical artists to the trait of having focus or mental toughness. He states, "If I can be convinced that they're going to focus then I can make it with some talent. Talent and focus, I'll get there".

All in all, whether it be sports, music or arts, there are seven common traits that all successful athletes, musicians or artists share in common, with love of the activity, confidence and perseverance being mentioned the most often.

Analysis:

Now that the meaning of success in each tier of life has been defined and the traits that necessary to be successful have been determined, it is time to connect all the areas of life and determine the most important characteristics of a successful person. Below is a list of the traits that were mentioned in each area. The number of times that each trait was mentioned was counted, with the max being five time, once in each realm of life. Some traits were mentioned only in one area of life, while others were deemed important in four to five categories.

One Area

- Physical attraction
- Choice to be together
- Shared beliefs, interests and goals
- Sacrifice
- Love of the activity
- Mental toughness
- Proactive
- Supportive

Two Areas

- Trust/Commitment
- Communication
- Competitive

Three Areas

- Hard Working
- Confidence

Four Areas

- Goal Oriented

Five Areas

- Perseverance

Keep in mind that some of the traits that exist in the one area could be applied to the other categories. However, that trait was not deemed to be critical in the success of that area of life, example being love of the activity. It was decided that it was necessary to have love for the activity in order to succeed in the recreational field and while this could be applied to the work or school areas as well, it was decided that it was not required to love the job one has in order to succeed at it.

After breaking down the ratio of which traits corresponded to the most categories, a very interesting pattern emerged. The characteristics that only affect one area of life are, in general, very specific to an individual task. Also, there is a substantial amount of these traits.

Physical attraction and being proactive are very specific characteristics crucial to success in family and school, respectively. However, these traits don't cross boundaries and aren't necessary to succeed in other parts of life. As the amount of areas affected increased, the amount of traits that cross boundaries began to decrease, with only three traits existing in three areas of life and one trait existing in four and five areas of life. The only trait that was deemed to be crucial in the success of all areas was perseverance, with goal oriented being close to a unanimous shared trait. As I began to focus my research on this concept, it began to emerge how truly important the characteristic of perseverance, or grit really is.

Perseverance

Of all characteristics that a person can possess, there is little question that any are as valuable to being successful as having grit. Grit is, in essence, perseverance – the online definition given says of grit,

[Grit] is a positive, non-cognitive trait based on an individual's passion for a particular long-term goal or end state coupled with a powerful motivation to achieve their respective objective. This perseverance of effort promotes the overcoming of obstacles or challenges that lie within a gritty individual's path to accomplishment and serves as a driving force in achievement realization.

I had never heard of the word grit until I started to dig deeper into this concept of perseverance. I watched an amazing TED talk by Angela Lee Duckworth titled *The Key to Success? Grit*. Angela makes an argument that grit is the most important indicator of success in *all* areas of life. From the officers in training at West Point to inner city schools, the people who

have the drive and desire to succeed are the ones who end up succeeding the majority of the time. She also states that grit has no relation to talent and that it sometime actually has an inverse relationship with natural ability. "...grit, may in fact matter more than IQ to eventual success in life". This is the same idea that is argued in *Outliers*, the concept that IQ has only a limited impact on how successful a person will be – the more important traits being the intangible ones. I continued my research, seeing if I could find anything that would either prove or disprove this idea of grit being the most important trait that a person can possess.

I stumbled upon a study done by Joseph C. Hermanowicz titled *What Does It Take to Be Successful?* In this study, Joseph surveyed 60 physicists working in various US universities. They were asked to select what characteristic is most important to succeed. An overwhelming 31 of the 60 (over 50%) scientists chose the word persistence. In comparison, the next highest answer was smart, with 15 mentions. So why would persistence be such an important trait in the physics field? Joseph offers the answer that scientist value this trait of never giving up because of the experimental process of trial and error. However, from the research that I have done, I believe that it has more to do with the fact that persistence or grit is the most important trait in any field, regardless of the profession.

Throughout every article and book I read, this same concept of never giving up continued to occur, regardless of the situation. This caused me to think about my own life, so I began to look for examples of gritty or none gritty people that I personally know. One of the people I examined was my brother, someone who is incredibly bright and successful in school. He was given a theoretical math problem a few weeks ago, dealing with the perimeter of a square and the circumference of a circle. I watched him attempt to do this problem several

times and not have any success. He did this for about 20 minutes, having no success. Most people at this point would deem this problem impossible and give up. Failure, however, did not discourage my brother. At random times throughout that night, he would think of a new angle to approach this problem and then proceed to attempt to find a solution. He did this several times and again, could not find the answer. Ultimately, I do not know if my brother ever ended up finding his solution. However, the more important part of this story is not in the solution but in the process. This concept of not letting failure defeat someone is the building blocks of grit. Failure and perseverance are inverses of each other – with the thought of failing often times driving people to succeed.

I examined a second person in my life, my five year old cousin who came to visit me over Thanksgiving break. At five years old, he was just learning to read and do some simple math. However, I wasn't observing how well these skills were developing. I was looking to see how he overcame adversity and his reaction when he ran into a word he didn't know. For the most part, the reaction was instant anger and skipping that word and moving onto the next one. After some coaxing, I began to relay the message to him that he couldn't just give up when he couldn't get the word right away. We began to sound out words that he didn't know and I found that when we did this, the feeling of self-accomplishment that he gained began to change his attitude toward challenges. In conjunction with the idea of Angela Lee Duckworth, I began to see how important it is to instill this sense of a work ethic and the characteristics of grit into young people. Also similar to her, I am unsure how this concept of grit can effectively be instilled in children. I do believe, though, that this trait is just as, if not more important to teach young kids as it is to teach them to read and do math.

When talking about perseverance, it is critical to mention the concept of failure. It is an unarguable fact that people will fail during their lifetimes. As Thomas Edison famously once said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work". The people who are successful use failure not as a means of judgment, but as a way to challenge themselves. Bill Cosby said it best, "In order to succeed, your desire for success should be greater than your fear of failure". When life gives someone a challenge, the people who succeed are the people who never even consider that there is an option to fail. It's the people who get knocked down 99 times but get up 100 who find success in life. It's the idea that knowing that one might fail that makes life so great. If everything came easy, there would never be a sense of achievement. The most rewarding things in life require the most struggle. If the journey is tough, the view is going to be all the more beautiful. And in twenty years from now, people fail to remember the things that came easy. The things that were hard, however, leave long lasting satisfaction. This is grit. It's this idea of wanting to be successful so badly.

Building off of this idea of having the drive to succeed, is the worldwide YouTube video titled *How Bad Do You Want It?* In this video, the speaker, Eric Thomas, is quoted saying "When you want to succeed as bad as you want to breathe, then you will be successful". Again, this video has the prevalent message of grit. This is the same concept that has repeatedly shown to be the key to success. Successful people have the passion and the drive to overcome failure. People do not know when opportunities in life are going to present themselves. However, people who have grit and who want to succeed that bad insure that they will be ready when the chance comes.

Conclusion

Prior to doing any research on this topic, I had always attributed the successes in my life to my confidence and competitive nature. I have always been that way and have always had those personal traits. I can remember when I was younger, six to eight years old, playing football in my backyard with my dad. He would throw me deep passes and I would run and try to catch them. I would not stop playing until I caught a certain amount of passes in a row and sometimes it would take an hour or two. I can remember getting so mad, yet I never gave up until I completed my goal. To this day I feel bad because I know it ruined my dad's shoulder, making him throw me thousands of full yard throws. Whether its sports, school, family or my faith, this trait of perseverance has given me the opportunities that I have today. I can now see how my traits of competitiveness and confidence fall right under the idea of grit.

Confidence is knowing that when you fail, you are going to get back up and be stronger than ever. Someone who is confident doesn't fear failure because they've failed so many times before that they know they can overcome it. Competitiveness comes from the idea of always wanting to be the best and not giving up until that goal is obtained. A competitive person will do his or her best at everything they do and refuse to take no for an answer.

Both of these characteristics stem directly from perseverance. This idea of not giving up until success is found and being able to overcome failures along the way is the definition of grit. Grit is confidence. Grit is competitiveness. And grit is the trait that a person must have in order to succeed at anything they do in life.

Success is an abstract concept that is pursued by everyone who has ever lived. It is the nature of humans to want to succeed. People want to be the best but often times are unsure

what traits are necessary in order to succeed. By breaking down this idea of success into the areas of family, work, school, faith and recreation, I was able to analyze this concept of success through many different angles of vision. In all of the areas of life, one characteristic emerged as the most important trait, grit. As I began to divulge deeper into this concept, I found that there were others who shared this idea of grit being the trait that is required for success. Grit is not the only thing that is needed by a person. A certain amount of natural talent combined with other intangible traits are required to succeed in work, school or sports. However, it is clear that perseverance is the trait that is takes to be successful.

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