

What is your Definition of Success

Success is many things. It is both a concept and an experience, a moment as well as an evolution. It is the merging of your aspirations with reality; the weaving of your hopes and dreams with your daily tasks. It is simultaneously tangible and ephemeral, and gives the illusion of being universally quantifiable. Success is externally evaluated, yet intrinsically experienced; it is both objective and subjective. The true essence of success, beneath the visible markers and goals, lies in your own personal sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.

What comes to mind for you when you think about "success?"

What are the images you see? What does it feel like in your bones to have succeeded?

Do you imagine reaching the apex of your profession? Or do you imagine amassing great wealth?

Does it mean seeing your face on the cover of national magazines or reading your name in "Who's Who?"

For some people success may be any one or all of these. For others, it may be something entirely different, like perhaps earning enough money to retire at 50, or having their own art show in a gallery, or coaching their child's little league team to victory.

To some, success looks like grand achievement, to others it resembles daily rewards, and still others measure it as the accomplishment of an underlying life mission. It may mean being a good friend, or raising socially responsible children, or being a loving grandparent. For some, the achievement looks like having lived ethically, honorably, or according to their values and conscience.

For many, finding or sustaining a romantic relationship or marriage is a goal. Overcoming a disability, hardship, challenge or obstacle is the criteria for some, whereas breaking records - athletic, financial, historic or scientific - is where fulfillment lies for others.

Since each person is an individual, comprised of their own visions and standards, each one defines success in their own way. My definition is probably not the same as yours, nor is yours exactly the same as that of other people you know. We are a constellation of individuals, each holding our own place in the cosmos and twinkling from within as a result of whatever gives us our own individual glow. The first basic rule of success, and perhaps the most important, is that there is no one universal definition of fulfillment. We each have our own, and every one is equally precious and worthy.

THE STANDARDS OF SUCCESS

The popular cultural definition of success in industrial nations is based primarily on three elements: power, money, and fame. It is assumed that if you are in possession of great abundance, have status or power, or are recognized as a celebrity, then you are, by society's definition, "successful." If you have even one of those three requirements, you qualify.

There is, however, one major problem with this definition: it is severely limited. It excludes a multitude of people who are successful in their own right, and who define success by an entirely different set of standards. These are the people whose bank balances may not be especially noteworthy, nor do they brandish significant authority, nor are they necessarily recognized when they walk down the street. Rather, these are the people who have realized goals and dreams that have been set from within, rather than those dictated by societal norms.

Consider the school principal who started a middle school that teaches children values and self-esteem and love of nature. Is creating an environment where children grow in healthy ways and develop awareness and values any less successful than the business tycoon who masterminds corporate buyouts?

Consider the person who volunteers at their local hospital to read to the elderly whose eyes can no longer perform the task. Is this person any less of a success than the professional ball player who scores the winning run as the most valuable player?

Think about the scientist who has dedicated her life to finding a cure for cancer. Is she only considered a success if she actually finds the cure? Do the hours and dedication she has put forth only count if the result is achieved? Is the success measured only in the culmination or is the commitment, the perseverance, and the pursuit valued as well?

What about the middle-aged man who leaves his law practice to pursue his dream of carving and selling canoes? If his delight is in doing what makes him happy, is he any less prosperous than the celebrity who grosses \$10 million per movie?

Success is amorphous, and like the other vast intangible - love - there is no universal means by which we can measure it. What it means for one person may not resonate for another. It may be the collective goal of many, but it ultimately has only one true judge. You, and only you, can assess your success, for it is you alone who determine what it really means for you.

THE DIFFERENT MODELS OF SUCCESS

"Make sure you have - and preserve - your own set of eyes."

- Laurie Beth Jones

Dana was in her thirties when she came to my workshop because she was experiencing what she called a "free-floating sense of dissatisfaction" with her job. She enjoyed the high-level position she held at a large computer company, but a small voice in her heart whispered to her that there was more. She had achieved each and every goal she had set before her, including promotions, raises, and even a much-coveted window office, yet she was not fulfilled.

As Dana talked, I picked up on phrases like "I should feel happy," and "I look successful but I feel like a failure." So I asked Dana point blank what

would make her feel like a success. She paused for less than fifteen seconds before blurting out “being able to bring my dog to work.”

It seems that Dana had always had a vision in her mind of being able to bring her beloved dog Bodhi with her to work. She had once visited a friend at her friend’s small boutique advertising agency and was delighted to see the agency’s owner’s Schnauzer greeting clients at the door. To Dana, being able to bring her dog to work signified autonomy; it meant one of two things: either she had climbed high enough on the corporate ladder that she was beyond policies, or that she was running her own company where she could establish her own rules. Deciding between the two was not difficult for her, and Dana is now happily running her own web design business, with Bodhi snoozing contentedly under her desk.

For some people, like Dana, success is synonymous with autonomy. For others it looks like financial freedom. Troy, for example, had a desire to earn enough money so that he could retire at age 50 and spend his days traveling around the world with his wife. To him, success meant being able to afford to do the things he wanted to do and to enjoy himself.

To Jeff, a stock broker in his forties, success was also measurable in financial terms. His, however, were different than Troy’s. His vision was to be able to make enough money to buy a home for his aging parents in Las Vegas for their retirement. Jeff was enormously grateful to his parents for all they had done for him, including both of them working two jobs to put him through college; taking care of them in their later years for Jeff would be his ultimate joy and satisfaction.

Nina, an interior decorator who traveled extensively, did not relish dealing with logistics. When she dreamed of prosperity, it was with the vision of being able to hire people to help her with things like repairing her computer when it crashed, installing shelves in her closets, cleaning her apartment when she couldn’t find the time, arranging her travel plans, and so on. To Nina, fulfillment came in the form of making enough money to hire people to support her with her busy life.

For some, success is defined as emotional fulfillment and stability. Sondra came from a difficult and tumultuous childhood, and set a goal to create a happy, harmonious home for her children and her. Every night, when she sits down to dinner with her husband and three children, she is flooded with a sense of fulfillment. To Sondra, success is achieved each moment she experiences the joy of being together with her family.

Many - dare I hope most - parents deem raising their children well as a sign of success. Though Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis was an internationally known personality who enjoyed a prosperous lifestyle and had many glamorous and exciting experiences, she held her job as a parent as singularly most important. “If you bungle raising your kids,” she is quoted as saying, “I don’t think whatever else you do well matters very much.”

Success can be defined as glory, as it is for the athlete who wins a race or a mountain climber who scales Mt. Everest. Those in the armed services who serve their country might define success in these terms, as well.

Courage can be the model for success, as it is for those who must reach inside themselves for the stamina to overcome a serious illness or those who must face tragedies in life. Helen Keller is perhaps the most famous name symbolizing courage, as her triumph in life from within her sightless, soundless world stands as a symbol of what the human spirit is capable of. Her legacy includes one of my favorite quotes

About the Author

Dr. Cherie Carter-Scott is an International Author, Motivational Speaker, Management Consultant and Original Coach Trainer since 1974. She is the Founder and Chair of [The Motivation Management Service Institute Inc.](http://www.mmsvt.com) To know about Dr. Cherie, please visit her website www.DrCherie.com. You can access her Online Virtual Training programs by visiting www.mmsvt.com.

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