

First You Have to Define Success

Adapted from *Succeed on Your Own Terms*

“What is *your* definition of success?”

In order to answer that question, you must be comfortable knowing that there is no single formula for success.

But there is definitely a path that is right for you.

Arriving at your own answer takes a unique combination of personal reflection *and* learning from others.

Rather than pondering the question though, allow us to suggest that you create your own statement. It becomes the ultimate fill-in-the-blank statement. Write it down on a piece of paper. And carry it with you. Here it is: I’ll be succeeding (*then fill in a time frame, such as by the end of this year or by this summer*) when I (*then fill in the blank.*)

At first, it may appear deceptively simple. But in that simplicity, there is true clarity. This test is not timed. And there is no right or wrong answer. Only your own.

Once you *own* that answer, you will find that amazing things will start to happen.

So, here it is again:

“I’ll be succeeding by (*fill in a time frame*) when I (*fill in the blank*).

You may know the answer right now.

Or you may need to ponder it. If so, carry the piece of paper with the blanks with you. And look at it several times a day. Consider it in quiet moments. Talk about it with those you trust. Sleep on it. Let it stir you.

Just by having that statement in front of you, your mind and heart will feel compelled to fill in the blanks.

Then, once you have written your own definition of success, you will find yourself starting to move in that direction. Opportunities will begin to occur. And new doors will open.

What is your definition of success?

Allow us to share with you some of the definitions what we have learned from others. Perhaps you will recognize parts of yourself in their stories. Reflecting on these stories is a way to begin help creating your own definition, and opening the door to your own success.

One of the more classic definitions of success came from Rebecca Stephens, the first British woman to climb Mount Everest. She realized that reaching the highest point on earth was her goal when she was a journalist and her editor assigned her to report on a group of climbers who were going to scale the northeast ridge of the world's tallest mountain. At that point she didn't know the first thing about mountain climbing, but it seemed like a plum assignment, so she grabbed it. That was in 1989, and all she was expected to do was file a few stories about what it was like to prepare for the climb. What struck her most was the level of passion every climber felt for getting to the top of Mount Everest. "At first I wondered why they were willing to risk their lives just to climb these rocks," she said. But she soon realized there was a bigger story here and wired her editors, saying, "I'd like to try to answer the question: Why do climbers climb?" At that point, she had gone beyond her assignment and was asking her own questions. She proposed that she climb to the first camp so she could describe firsthand the effects of reaching that altitude. She said, "I knew this was the only way to really understand the desire that was driving these climbers."

We'll tell you later about her defining moment and the qualities that drove her to defy the elements and face the very real possibility of death, first with Mount Everest and then when going on to scale the highest peak on each continent. Most important, in her decision to make the climb, she realized something about herself she hadn't known before.

And it was invigorating.

And clarifying.

Part of that realization had to do with a Rebecca finding her own definition of success. For Rebecca, **“Success is the achievement of whatever it is you set out to do. And it’s up to you to decide what that is. It can’t be determined by anyone else.** Success is not, absolutely not, defined by the accumulation of wealth. If riches come along with your success, that’s great. But money alone is not a measure of true success. You might have done everything in your power to achieve your goal, yet obstacles that are beyond your control prevented you from reaching it. The weather might keep you from reaching the top of the mountain, or the economic climate might hold you back from reaching another goal. But you can still consider yourself successful if you put everything you had into it, and if you learned a thing or two along the way. It’s not an easy definition of success, but it’s not impossible either. It’s all about setting a goal and totally connecting yourself to achieving it.”

After four years of intense training Rebecca stood on top of the world for 10 minutes. The summit, as she describes, is a tiny area. It’s the point where the three tapered faces of the mountain rise and meet. It’s only about 15 feet by 10 feet. That’s it. So you don’t step back when you’re taking a picture. There’s also no doubt about it when you reached the very top. From there she could look all the way down the mountain, and see everything – her past, present and her possibilities. “And for those ten minutes,” she said, “that mountain was completely ours. It was just a magical feeling of solitude up there where everywhere you looked there was wilderness. It was exquisitely beautiful.” Then they had to descend. Quickly. There was no time to waste. It was all a matter of timing. They had just six hours of daylight, which they had to use with maximum efficiency, in order to get back down the mountain. So they took several quick photographs and made tracks.

Climbing Mount Everest is success on anyone’s terms. “It was an incredible challenge,” Rebecca explained. “It also took enormous respect for the mountain. I had never pursued anything with such conviction as I did my quest to climb Everest. To me that was half the battle won, if not more. **To succeed, you first need a very keen awareness of yourself. It requires really listening to**

your inner voice, so you have the courage to pursue a path that aligns with your desires. When you find that, then you have the impetus to achieve. That's the secret, I believe."

Ben Vereen has a somewhat different take on success. This galvanizing Broadway, movie and television singer, dancer, and actor with an electric smile, elastic movements, and exuberant energy said, "What is the top of your game? You know it when you are in it. When you are true to it, when you are honest, and when you have integrity, the top is not a place. The top is eternal."

"There is no final peak," he added, "because you are constantly striving for the highest good. If you feel you've peaked at something, you've placed a ceiling on it, put an end to it."

He paused, then added, "The peak can be very confusing. You can think you're there when you're not. It's like a guy who is driving down the highway and sees a place called The Peak. So he pulls over and rents a room for the night. Then he wakes up and drives off thinking he's been to The Peak. But it was only a rest stop. That's all. Some people never go any farther than that because they think they've been to The Peak. But you've got to keep going. You can't be fooled by the rest stops or the places where you're just fueling your car. Sometimes those stops are diversions or just distractions. Or the filling stations of adversity. You've got to listen to that voice inside that says, 'Keep going. It's farther up the road.' Because there is never going to be a point where you've totally made it. **The peak of my game is eternal.**"

This from a man who became part of America's consciousness when he portrayed Chicken George, the grandson of Kunta Kinte who won his freedom in Alex Haley's landmark miniseries *Roots*, won a Tony Award as best actor in a musical for his role in *Pippin*, and co-starred in *All That Jazz*, Bob Fosse's semi-autobiographical film.

"I'm on that journey," Ben said, his eyes lighting up and his smile igniting. "I'm on that journey," he repeated as if to himself.

Paul Schulte, the youngest U.S. wheelchair basketball player at the 2000 Paralympic Games in Sydney, reflected on what success was like at the Olympic level. "We were in front of 18,000 people, playing the Australians in their own house. The sound was deafening. It was the only time in my life

that I've been as close to someone as you and I are right now, and I was screaming at the top of my lungs to the guy next to me, and he didn't even turn his head. The energy was amazing. The floor shook. I'd never felt a floor shake from the excitement of a crowd. I'd never experienced anything like it. Everybody was over the top. Our team had to resort to hand signals because we couldn't hear each other. Right before the tip-off, I froze the moment in my mind. And I said to myself, 'This is success.'"

Paul's team went on to win. "But the experience itself," he said, "that was the real success. At the tip-off we wanted to win more than anything. But just by being there, we knew we had already succeeded."

Paul said, "Success is focusing on what you have rather than what you don't have. In my life, there were 10,000 things I could have done before my disability. Now there may be only 9,000.

You've got to focus on your present opportunities and let the rest go."

Paul often meets people who have just been in an accident and lost the use of one or more of their limbs. It's a fragile time. Their lives have been turned upside down and inside out. "I try to let them know that they are still the same person they were before. Their bodies may have changed, but they are the same person—maybe even better. They just need to accept what's happened and discover their own amazingness."

He recalled a time when he was talking with a young woman who had barely survived an accident and had come out as a paraplegic. He was listening to her and knew exactly where she was coming from: the disbelief, the anger, all of it. Then Paul told her that he felt very lucky, and she said she thought he was off his rocker. He explained, "Let me tell you how you actually have an advantage over most people walking on this planet. First and foremost, you won't be afraid of dying anymore. When you get real close to death, you lose the fear of it. You know what it's like to be that close. And it helps you live your life a little bit differently, more fully. Not that everybody should have a tragic experience; I wouldn't wish that on anyone. But for those of us who have been through it, there is much to be gained. You could look at what happened and say, 'I'm a victim. This happened to me, and

everybody should feel sorry for me.’ Or you can say, ‘This is an opportunity.’ **If you can view adversity as an opportunity, things will be completely different. That’s when you’re ready to succeed.**”

He paused, then said, “Succeeding is not just about the results you produce. It’s about what you’re actually doing. **It’s really about aiming for a dream.** You’re aiming. And it’s exciting. You don’t worry about failing or succeeding. You’re just *in it*. That’s all that matters. Success is a by-product.”

For a guy who led his team to a gold medal by averaging 17 points a game at the 2002 Gold Cup, it’s interesting that he sees such a clear distinction between winning and succeeding.

Paul concluded, “If you lose, that doesn’t mean you’re not successful. It’s a loss only if you don’t learn something from it.”

For anyone who thinks success can be measured solely by how much money you have, Fariborz Ghadar, Ph.D., an international consultant who was named one of the top 10 Stars of Finance by *Business Week*, can clear up that misconception.

He was the vice minister of finance for Iran, a member of the shah’s cabinet who was responsible for identifying global investment opportunities for a country that had more money than it knew what to do with. He was traveling to virtually every nation in the world, recommending that Iran’s oil money be invested in everything from pistachios to Persian rugs.

Then the revolution came.

And he didn’t have the slightest idea that it was about to break open.

“You can be right in the middle of such events yet not really see them,” he said. “Buildings were being burned, there were riots in the streets, people were being killed, and I was saying, ‘This will pass. It’s just one of those temporary things.’ Then my wife called me from London and said, ‘Quick, turn on CNN. It’s time to get out.’ As she was trying to convince me that I wasn’t seeing the whole picture, bullets came streaking into our office. We were on the top floor, the seventh, and bullets

were flying all over the place. So I agreed that, well, maybe I should get out of there. And I left. It was one of the turning points of my life.

“When I got to the airport, I tried to exchange the Iranian money I had, which was quite a bit. But they would give me only one-fifth of its face value. ‘Forget it,’ I said. ‘I’ll be back in a few weeks. I’ll keep my money.’”

But his money wasn’t the only issue. It was extremely difficult to get a plane out of the country. Fortunately, his father, who was then the ambassador to Jordan, was able to get him on a Jordanian airline. From there he was able to book a flight to London.

He tried to exchange his money in Jordan and this time was offered only one-tenth of its value. Again he said, “Forget it. I’ll just hold on to it until this thing blows over.” When he arrived in London just a few hours later, his money was completely worthless. Nobody wanted it at any price. **“I still have several fistfuls of that money. I keep it in a drawer. It reminds me of how little money is really worth and how transient such values are.”**

Fariborz learned that success has less to do with what you have than with knowing who you are. “I’ve always taken pride in being able to see what is going on around me,” he explained. “But I’ve learned that when you are right in the middle of it, you sometimes can’t see it, no matter how brilliant you are. You often have to step outside a situation to know what’s really happening. That was a valuable lesson for me—even more valuable than the money I lost, which was basically everything I had.”

Whose definition of success resonates most with you? Do any of them prompt you to start thinking about your own definition?

From executives to athletes, and from politicians to artists, we’ve heard some incredible stories about their successes. And each of them has come up with his or her own personal definition of success, a definition that helps define and drive who he or she is.

Perhaps you connect most with Rebecca Stephens, who had a goal that became part of her. Or you may identify more with Ben Vereen, who believes that success starts with believing in yourself as you continue your search on this planet. Or Paul Schulte's definition might speak to you: Success is focusing on what you have rather than what you don't have. Or you might get more from Fariborz Ghadar's understanding that success has less to do with what you have than with knowing who you are.

Whose definition of success resonates most with you? Did any of them prompt you to start thinking about your own definition? If that's the case, you're well on your way to being successful on your own terms. Perhaps you are thinking, "Maybe there's something else, something more, that I can do." **When you arrive at your own personal definition of success, it will help clarify what you have to do next to achieve your dreams, whatever they are.**

We'll leave you with one last definition of success, one of our favorites. It comes from an amazing Brazilian author and inspirational speaker, José Luiz Tejon Megido, whom you'll hear more about later. For now, we just want to share with you his particular definition of success, one that seems to transcend all the others and, at the same time, tie them all together: **"Success starts with keeping a sense of youth about you. Keep inside of you an image of the child you were. And make sure that child is always part of who you are and what you're doing."**