



Defining Success

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I couldn't wait for success, so I went ahead without it. -Jonathan Winters

Stop and think for a moment about how you define success. Think about people who you consider successful. What makes them successful in your eyes? Do you feel successful at this very moment? If so, what factors make you successful? If not, what would need to happen for you to be a success?

The old paradigm of success revolved around power or money. Successful people usually had an ample supply of each. That was the hallmark. Unsuccessful people were that way because they felt deprived of these things. I always start out each leadership class with a brainstorm of what people believe success is and how to achieve it.

Most people express success in terms other than money or power. People say that success is embodied in terms like:

- Being free to do what I want in life
- Reaching a goal
- Having a well balanced life
- The ability to feel happy most of the time
- Having other people show me respect
- Having security in life
- Achieving fulfillment
- Finding real joy and love in life

Personally, I believe there is still a strong coupling between people's view of success and money or power, but they are reluctant to admit it because it is politically incorrect. Two authors have shaped my own view of success dramatically: Napoleon Hill and Earl Nightingale. They both understood the Downwind Leader's view of success.

I found the story of Napoleon Hill and how he gained his profound wisdom to be captivating.¹ Napoleon grew up in a poor rural community in the South. His natural mother died when he was very young, and his father remarried a remarkable woman who gently shaped him over the next 15 years into a man of remarkable perspective.

Since they were a poor family (like the proverbial “no shoes until age 12”), Napoleon had to get his education from books and had little chance for a typical higher education. He finally did enroll in a 2-year secretarial college. His approaches to opportunity were unconventional to say the least, like the way he got his first job. When he graduated from college, he decided to use his secretarial skills to get a job working directly for a highly powerful man, so he wrote a letter to General Rufus A. Aires of Virginia. General Aires owned a railroad, a chain of banks, a chain of sawmills, a chain of coalmines, and in addition to that, he was a senior member of one of the most important law firms in the State of Virginia. Napoleon’s letter to the General set him apart from all other job seekers from the first sentence.

Dear General Aires,

I have just completed the Secretarial Course at Business College and I *know* you will be glad to hear that I have chosen you to be my first employer.

I am willing to go to work for you under the following conditions: I will work for you for the first three months and pay you a salary of any amount you name per month for that privilege. With the understanding that if, at the end of those three months you wish to continue my services, you will pay me that same salary. But meanwhile, you will allow me to put on the cuff what I’ll owe you and you can take it out of what you’ll owe me if you continue my services.

Sincerely,
Napoleon Hill

The unconventional approach generated an interview because the General wanted to “take a look at this boy.” When Napoleon Hill went into his huge office, General Aires got up from his desk and without saying a word walked all the way around the youngster. Then he went back to his desk and said, “I only have one question – did you write that letter all by yourself or did you have some help.”

Napoleon replied, “Yes sir, General Aires, I wrote that letter myself and I mean every word of it.”

The General replied, “That’s just what I thought when I looked at you. You will start tomorrow morning at the regular secretarial rate.” This story illustrates that Napoleon Hill understood the power of what he called “definiteness of purpose” at an early age. He was already well on his way to understanding the nature of success as a Downwind Leader.

The most captivating story Hill tells is how he got linked up with Andrew Carnegie, then the richest and most powerful man in the world. He was assigned to interview Carnegie for a newspaper article on leadership. Carnegie gave Napoleon three hours, and when those were up he said, “This interview is just starting. Come on over to the house and we’ll take it up after dinner.” Carnegie gave Napoleon a hard sell on the need for a new philosophy of leadership to pass on to future generations. He said it was a crime that all the knowledge

gained by the great men of history was buried with their bones when they died. Nobody had distilled it into an accessible body of knowledge for anyone in the future to read.

A couple of days later, Carnegie gave Napoleon a most remarkable offer. He said, "I want you to come and work for me. I want you to learn all you can from the great minds of leadership of our time. The job will take you about 20 years to complete. I will not pay you any salary at all during the 20 years. Instead, I will introduce you to the greatest minds alive today. You will earn your own way on your wits. What do you say – yes or no?"

Napoleon first decided that he could not do it, then he thought about it for a few seconds more. Finally after 29 seconds he said "I'll do it." Carnegie then pulled out a stop watch and said he was going to retract the offer if Hill had not agreed within the span of one minute. He had just 31 seconds between the most fantastic offer ever given to an individual author or a lonely railroad ride back to Washington.

Carnegie kept his part of the bargain and introduced Napoleon Hill to over 500 of the most successful and powerful men in the world. (I do find it difficult to listen to Napoleon tell the story in his own words in his tape series, *The Science of Personal Achievement* because he talks only about great men. I guess in his day that limited sexist way of thinking was the norm. It sounds so foreign and unenlightened to hear those words today.)

Napoleon Hill actually worked on the project for the rest of his life and wrote his famous book, *Think and Grow Rich* as the centerpiece of the philosophy Carnegie had envisioned.² Of course, he wrote many other books and spoke on the philosophy all over the world. His work has influenced millions of people and is still one of the most popular books ever printed.

A protégé of Napoleon Hill was a man named Earl Nightingale. Earl was another highly unusual seeker of truth about leadership.³ He devoted his life to the study of great minds of leadership throughout the ages. He was a friend of Napoleon Hill and updated many of Hill's theories to be more contemporary. Earl was actually able to boil the philosophy down into a single 6-word sentence that he called the strangest secret in the world. That sentence is, "We become what we think about." A more expanded way of putting it was provided by Hill, "Whatever the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve." The entire philosophy is too complex to explain thoroughly in this book, but the key principle below is a critical leadership concept that should be an underpinning of every book on leadership because it has transformational power.

Earl Nightingale taught the world to view success differently from the conventional wisdom of the past. We are used to thinking of successful leaders as people with lots of wealth and power. While those two things do not create happiness (in fact, they often lead to great unhappiness) they were for centuries the measurable standard for defining success. Nightingale's significant contribution was that success was not even about *achieving* a goal. Rather, he defines success as the *pursuit* of a worthy goal. It takes a bit of thinking, but the more you play with that sentence in your mind, the more compelling the wisdom becomes. It is really true that the feeling of being successful is in the pursuit of

excellence rather than achieving some milestone. Milestones are for celebrating progress along the way, but the sincere pursuit of the right path is what success is all about.

The amazing simplicity of this concept is transformational, because it allows everyone in an organization to feel successful most of the time. In nearly all organizations, the majority of people go through their career day by day, not feeling like they are successful. There is always some milestone not yet achieved that has them feeling like they are almost there, but not quite successful. Leaders who understand Earl Nightingale's teaching can easily transform a population of losers to one of successful people by helping them change their attitude about what makes a successful person. That is an amazing gift to give people. In our sailboat analogy, this means as long as we have our destination clearly specified, are heading downwind toward it, and are mindful of traps beneath the surface, we are *already* successful.

Leaders need to understand the wisdom of the philosophies of Napoleon Hill and Earl Nightingale because they have been highly refined from the best minds of leadership in the history of mankind. Unfortunately, many leaders get so caught up in activity traps, they lose sight of these simple truths and the power they have.

The preceding information was adapted from the book *Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind*, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.

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