

Successful Supervisor Part 15

The Meaning of Success

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Since this series of articles is all about success, I thought one article on the actual topic of success would be in order. Stop for a minute and think about what success means to you. Think about a highly “successful” person you know. How would you describe what it is that makes him or her successful?

I have been doing this exercise in my leadership classes for over 15 years. Surprisingly, the two conventional methods of determining success are rarely identified by the leadership students.

When I was growing up, success was often described in financial terms. A successful person had a lot of money to throw around and lived in a big house. Alternatively, we used to think of success in terms of power. The higher you were in the organization and the more people you had reporting to you, the more successful you were.

People in my classes do not focus on money or power when trying to describe success. Instead, they mention things like, being happy, reaching a goal, finding love, family and friends, and other more social manifestations of success. If they mention money, it is only to have enough to not be in need. I then share with the class that two deceased philosophers taught me an alternate view of success.

Napoleon Hill and Earl Nightingale were early pioneers of leadership research who had a major influence on my understanding of the subject. Napoleon spent his entire adult life pursuing the essence of leadership, and he put his thesis in a book entitled “Think and Grow Rich” as well as several other works both written and audio.

Actually, his first book was a set of eight volumes published in 1928, entitled “The Law of Success.” He later distilled his findings in an audio series titled “**The Science of Personal Achievement**,” where he enumerated his 17 Universal principles of Success. The work is still [available](#), and I highly recommend it. Napoleon Hill died in 1970 at the age of 87.

Earl Nightingale was a protégé of Napoleon Hill. He was a US Marine Corporal and was one of only 15 Marines who survived the attack on the USS Arizona at Pearl Harbor.

After the war, he became a radio announcer and studied leadership with Napoleon Hill. Earl is credited with clarifying what he called the strangest secret after reading countless books on philosophy and leadership. After many years of study, he boiled down the wisdom of the ages into just six words: **“We become what we think about.”**

Many philosophers and researchers have come up with a similar conclusion about success. Here is a brief video on the topic that I call [“Discovering the Same Vein of Gold.”](#)

Earl also wrote about personal success and recorded an outstanding audio program entitled [“Lead the Field.”](#) Over the years I have practically memorized the entire program. Earl wrote that the single word that governs our happiness all the days and years of our lives is “attitude.” We have the power to choose how we react to the things that happen to us in life. The quote that stuck with me the most from Earl’s program was a succinct definition of success. He wrote: “Success is the progressive realization of a worthy goal.”

Earl’s contribution means that “anyone who’s on course toward the fulfillment of a goal is successful now. Success does not lie in the achievement of a goal...it lies in the journey toward the goal.”

The concept hit home to me because it changes everything. Most people go through life not feeling particularly successful because they have not yet reached their goal in life. Nightingale said exactly the opposite. You are successful as you strive for that which you seek. Actually reaching a goal is simply a milestone: a moment to reflect and celebrate. But to continue being successful, you must quickly move on and strive for another more lofty goal.

Earl used the example of children at Christmas time to illustrate the point. He noted that kids are excited and happy on Christmas Morning as they anticipate and hope for wonderful gifts. On Christmas afternoon, once all the presents have been opened, one would think the kids would be at their peak of happiness, yet they are often cranky and a little depressed at that time. The reason is that all the magic and anticipation are gone. Sure there are toys to play with, but the zest is now blunted, even if what they received was more than they expected.

Success is strongest when we are reaching or striving for something. We feel alive and full of energy. Another way to describe the phenomenon is a quote from Cervantes that “The road is better than the Inn.” Success is in the pursuit of a worthy goal. This means that you are successful right now as you are working and struggling to improve your lot in life, as long as you have a goal.

As a supervisor, if you are reading and studying about leadership, you are successful **right now**. If you are taking courses or otherwise growing in your leadership knowledge, you are a success. You do not have to wait for someone to put a crown on your head to feel the elation of success; you already possess it as long as you are a lifelong learner or a person who is giving back to others as a goal.

Imagine the happiness that would exist if every supervisor realized this profound wisdom. As a result of reading this article, **you now have that wisdom**. You are more successful just because you read this article. Use this knowledge and teach it to others as just another way to cement your own personal success.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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