

Success That Lasts

by Laura Nash and Howard H. Stevenson

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Summary. Reprint: R0402H Pursuing success can feel like shooting in a landscape of moving targets: Every time you hit one, five more pop up from another direction. We are under constant pressure to do more, get more, be more. But is that really what success is all... [more](#)

A 55-year-old, highly successful venture capitalist is thinking about his next investment. He's not certain he has the energy to start another seven-year round of intense financing and consulting activity. "I just can't imagine enjoying that pace again, and frankly, it's time I paid attention to my family. But I'd really feel a loser if I didn't play the game as hard as everyone else. I guess I should retire."

The president of a \$1 billion division of a consumer products company discovers that manufacturing and distribution bugs will delay the scheduled rollout of a new product line. Retailers are eager for the product, pressures on share price are intense, and the president's bonus is tied to the rollout's success. If he goes ahead, the product is sure to be on top – but only temporarily. The costs down the road from disappointed consumers and time invested in having to fix mistakes will clearly hurt the bottom line. What is success under these circumstances?

A fast-track 32-year-old software engineer with a second degree in sacred music feels that something is missing in her career strategy. She wants the lifestyle of a well-paid manager, but software doesn't feel as socially significant as playing the organ for a congregation. And she someday wants a house and a family. "Why can't I find the career path that will get me all of these things?" she wonders. "Are they really so unreasonable?"

Different as these examples may be, these individuals have a similar problem: They all need a comprehensive framework for thinking about success. And they're far from alone.

Survey after survey shows a high degree of job dissatisfaction and burnout among the general working population, even among those with plenty of options. In the collective soul-searching prompted by September 11, 2001, many high achievers revisited their notion of success. The wave of corporate scandals that followed soon after only made the questions more acute. Even the most dedicated employees wondered aloud whether they would ever recommend their own careers and companies to their children.

Pursuing success is like shooting at a series of moving targets. Every time you hit one, five more pop up from another direction. Just when we've achieved one goal, we feel pressure to work harder to earn more money, exert more effort, possess more toys. Standards and examples of "making it" constantly shift, while a fast-paced world of technological and social change constantly poses new obstacles to overcome.

During the past decade, traditional career paths suddenly became pointless. Professionals found themselves overworked and undersatisfied in the boom, then overworked and competitively vulnerable in the bust. And far too many businesses discovered they were using the wrong measures to gauge success, winning big in the 1990s only to lose big for their shareholders and employees at the turn of the millennium. The climb to success can feel like an Escher drawing of a staircase that goes nowhere.

In the face of such instability, many people assume success requires a winner-takes-all approach. They believe that success depends on putting all your energy into achieving one goal, be it a single-minded focus on your job or a commitment to being the best soccer mom in your community. But no matter how noble, one goal can't satisfy all of a person's complex needs and desires, as the examples at the beginning of the article demonstrate. The same holds true for the goals of a business.

Fortunately, success doesn't have to be seen as a one-dimensional tug-of-war between achievement and happiness. If developed in the right way, your ideals of the good life for yourself and society can become powerful—and manageable—factors of success. We studied hundreds of high achievers who realize lasting success, make a positive difference, and enjoy the process. And we learned that some of the most successful people have gotten where they are precisely because they have a greater understanding of what success is really about and the versatility to make good on their

ideals. In this article, we'll introduce a practical framework that will help you see success in these same terms. But first, a closer examination of how we arrived at this model.

What Is Enduring Success?

Our research took a fresh look at the assumptions behind success. We were interested in real, enduring success—where getting what you want has rewards that are sustainable for you and those you care about. This type of attainment delivers a sense of legitimacy and importance; its satisfactions endure far beyond the momentary rewards of a bonus or a new position. Lasting success is emotionally renewing, not anxiety provoking.

Unlike an equation for a successful market strategy, no one person or company can fully embody lasting success for others. Everyone (and every business) has a unique vision of real success, and that notion changes over time. A family-oriented person would hardly call the absentee life of a top executive a success but might find travel and adventure just the ticket after the kids grow up. A born investment banker would hardly regard mixing cement as a successful career, whereas a construction worker who just completed an extraordinary bridge might point to the structure with pride for the rest of his or her life. No one, however, has unreserved success, not even the most obvious winner. Recognizing how important it is for each person to understand and develop his or her unique definition of success over time, we chose not to report on one or two well-known examples of success as the perfect model to follow.

Nonetheless, for the purposes of research, we posited five common characteristics of individuals who by most standards had achieved enduring success: high achievement, multiple goals, the ability to experience pleasure, the ability to create positive relationships, and a value on accomplishments that endure.

We held more than 60 interviews with successful professionals, surveyed 90 top executives attending Harvard Business School management programs, and informally observed high achievers with whom we live and work. We conducted more than a dozen model-testing sessions with between 50 and 110 executives in each. Most of these groups were drawn from HBS graduates or current members of the Young Presidents' Organization. We also reviewed the problems that the general population has reported about success, using sources that ranged from media reports to conversations with friends, students, and colleagues. We talked to people from all different walks of life, at every level of the

economy, both in and out of business careers. Some of them were stay-at-home parents who had once worked full time; others were at the pinnacle of their careers.

The Complexity of Success

Success involves more than a heart-pounding race to the finish line. Our research uncovered four irreducible components of enduring success: happiness (feelings of pleasure or contentment about your life); achievement (accomplishments that compare favorably against similar goals others have strived for); significance (the sense that you've made a positive impact on people you care about); and legacy (a way to establish your values or accomplishments so as to help others find future success).

These four categories form the basic structure of what people try to gain through the pursuit and enjoyment of success. Take away any one component, and it no longer feels like “real” success. If you were wildly wealthy because you had mastered a certain business problem but couldn't experience pleasure, for instance, would you consider yourself successful? If building your power base kept you from being there for others, would your success feel morally right? If you left your career to be a full-time parent, would you have enough of an outlet for your talents? Just as a steady diet of the same four foods would hardly be satisfying over the long term, the four components of success cannot be satisfied by the presence of a single flavor in each category. That is why you cannot neatly categorize the realms of your life, assigning happiness to self, achievement to work, significance to family, legacy to community.

Unless you hit on all four categories with regularity, any one win will fail to satisfy. You'll experience what we call the “wince factor”: You know you're doing what is right, but it still feels like a loss. You're preoccupied with thoughts of the other things you could be doing or getting. Your achievements and pleasures fade almost as soon as they occur. By contrast, success that encompasses all four kinds of accomplishment is enriching; it endures. You can create this synergy within a single event, but you can also create it through a juxtaposition of activities. Taking time out in the middle of a high-stress period or stopping to give back to the community while in the midst of pursuing your most self-advancing goals are good examples of this.

If you think about what constitutes a moment of lasting satisfaction in your own life—maybe it's your daily practice of a musical instrument—it may be surprisingly trivial in comparison with your major commitments at work or at home. The activity

draws force from accomplishing something distinctive in each of the four categories over time. The musical instrument provides release and pleasure (happiness), it is a challenge to master and build on (achievement), and it becomes even more fulfilling when you join a band that competes with other bands or play concerts at hospitals (significance). Those who also turn these “lesser” vocations into legacies that build the same opportunity for the next generation—say, through getting involved in recruiting and training younger musicians—will find an even deeper sense of success from so-called hobbies.

Anyone who takes the four elements of success seriously soon realizes how complicated it can be to touch on all four with regularity. As you scale up your goals, the four-part mix becomes more difficult to achieve. Each factor has a different set of characteristics. Satisfying different needs, they draw on distinctive emotional drives and prioritize self and others in different ways. That’s why people who tell you that happiness, achievement, and significance will come automatically if you simply do the work you love are misguided. Regardless of how much you care about your job, you will still feel conflicting desires—between work and home, between working forever on a problem and taking a break from it, between going for more market share today and investing in the company’s needs for tomorrow. The skills you use to compete are totally different from those you employ in moments of enjoyment. You can be there for a friend, and you can care about a customer, but these acts (in the significance category) can’t be substituted for the kind of thinking and prioritization that is necessary to structure favorable financial terms for your own firm (in the achievement category).

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Understanding the distinctive features of the four areas of success can help you articulate what you are seeking in a certain activity. You can then create a diagnostic for determining how to achieve the most appropriate goal. You may be expecting too many categories to be fulfilled without incorporating the right resources and perspectives, or you may be falling prey to a mismatch.

Matching your expectations to the right category is a critical skill for achieving sustainable success. If you expect happiness to come primarily from competition (an achievement skill), you'll probably turn into someone neither you nor those around you can tolerate—and wonder why success has made you so lonely. People who report having trouble defining the right goals for themselves or for their companies are often caught in such mismatches. For instance, a self-described family-friendly company might hold critical staff meetings over late dinners or during extended weekend retreats.

The act of categorizing in and of itself can help you take more decisive action and channel the right emotions and perspectives to the task at hand. You can stop measuring a job only by how happy it makes you or calculating a business success only in terms of your ability to achieve mastery over something. Instead, you'll see how one task fits into a larger context. By the same token, you'll be able to anticipate what kind of emotional capital you'll need to bring to a task. If you try to bring feelings of happiness or contentment to your achievement goals, you'll stunt your performance from the start. If you don't put achievement in its place, however, you'll trap yourself in a workaholic restlessness.

Those in our research who achieved satisfying, enduring, multidimensional success consciously went after victories in all four categories without losing touch with their values and special talents. They seemed to understand intuitively the paradox we uncovered at the heart of enduring success: To get to more wins on the various important measures that make up your notion of the good life, success has to rest on a paradigm of limitation in any one activity for the sake of the whole. Or, as we call it, “on the reasoned pursuit of just enough.”

This principle flies in the face of the popular opinion that success is all about breaking through limitations, that it's about having more, being more, doing more. Our research shows that the high-powered people who experienced real satisfaction achieved it through the deliberate imposition of limits. They all shared a versatile talent that we call “switching and linking”: They were able to focus intensely on one task until it gave them a particular sense of satisfaction, then put it down and jump to the next category with a feeling of accomplishment and renewed energy. This versatile refocusing could occur within the same activity (say, when you base your product strategy on accomplishing your

profit goal *and* on caring for the customer), or it can involve switching attention between two realms (taking a break from work to joke with a friend).

The people in our research who were particularly skilled at sifting through the moving targets and going after only those that would produce lasting rewards shared two characteristics. First, they viewed success as a broad and dynamic experience of accomplishment, one that factored in all four categories. They didn't attribute their success to one single event or even one single realm of life. Second, their concrete examples of what counted as "real" success included accomplishments of wildly varying magnitude. They weren't setting maximum goals for themselves in each category; rather, they set some at a small scale and some at a scale that demanded sustained effort. The baseline for these individuals wasn't the amount of activity or number of rewards in any one category, but the securing of a proportionate mix of all four. Anyone can learn to do this; you just need to have a larger framework in which to understand the dynamics of the four categories.

The Kaleidoscope Strategy

We compare an effective success strategy to a kaleidoscope—that simple mechanical device with a lens, mirror, and a long tube housing separate chambers. Each chamber holds pieces of glass that constantly shift as the tube is moved. Although the chambers are separate, the eye sees one unique picture made up of the various chambers. Mirrors reflect the entire set of glass chips and enhance the complexity of the pattern. The beauty of that pattern comes from the variety and symmetry of the design. Although the patterns in a kaleidoscope are inherently unstable, changed by your own movements or by outside forces, the pieces provide ongoing satisfaction as they take their places within new patterns.

Now imagine a slightly different kind of kaleidoscope, one that is your own vision of a successful life. This kaleidoscope also has four chambers—happiness, achievement, significance, and legacy—and you can add brilliant glass pieces (goals sought and fulfilled) over a lifetime, making your unique pattern richer and richer. In this metaphor, success is about choice, movement, pattern, and a structure that holds all the separate activities together. And, just like a kaleidoscope, you have to hold this pattern up to the light. By regularly assessing the picture you are creating in all four chambers, you can quickly spot "holes"—places you feel require more attention—in your activities and be

assured that you are justified in interrupting other work to attend to them. The rest of the chips will be enough for the moment, but not enough for the rest of your life.

Success is about choice, movement, pattern, and a structure that holds all the separate activities together.

Through our research, we discovered that the people who achieve enduring success rely on a kaleidoscope strategy to structure their aspirations. Not only do they continually create new chips in each of the four categories, but they also choose their actions so that the whole picture will display a pleasing proportionality. Feeling deep satisfaction in each category strengthens these achievers' ability to turn away from one category when another needs attention. It allows them to say, "I don't need to work away at this particular thing until I'm satiated and hate the very sight of it. This is just enough." They recognize the importance of setting their own standards for "enough" and not falling prey to the lure of the infinite "more."

This is exactly the kind of thinking you see in good leaders: They anticipate what will be needed in all four dimensions of success despite pressures to deliver to the maximum in one. This is what the subjects in the three examples at the beginning of this article were lacking. They had no framework in which to identify and sort multiple desires so that they could go after their conflicting goals sequentially in a proportionate mix.

The burned-out venture capitalist needs to understand that scaling back his achievement goals is part of a larger picture of expansion in the other categories, rather than a paralyzing prospect of loss and "doing nothing." This kaleidoscope view will allow him space to cultivate the emotional relationships he craves with his family. That doesn't mean he should give up all forms of achievement; he simply needs to readjust the level of energy he puts into that category. Doing so will require more creative thought and versatility than he's exhibiting now.

The executive overseeing the problematic product rollout was framing his dilemma in terms of short-term versus long-term achievement. He would do better to reframe his challenge in terms of legacy: What kind of platform would he be creating for the success of this product and that of future managers in the company if he decided to release incomplete products? Thinking

about the problem from this perspective helped him clarify his priorities. Instead of feeling that he had to make a trade-off in a negative sense, he could take a positive view of what needed the most attention and what was worth sacrificing for. In the end, he delayed rolling out the new product line—and not only were the retailers delighted with the final results, but the product division, in crafting the solution, discovered a new way to coordinate and leverage its technological capabilities across three countries.

The software engineer torn between computers and church music needed to shrink or redirect her goals in some activities and develop them in others. When she tried the kaleidoscope strategy, she quickly saw that church music registered high in her significance category but would always be a limited outlet for achievement. She had neither the skill nor the opportunity to become a star musician. Software had more potential for significance than she had previously thought. She needed to learn how to change her job in ways that emphasized the social value she was creating in the products she worked on and the help she provided to others. She began to see benefits in framing church music primarily as an exercise in significance rather than in achievement, with all its competitive and financial associations. But to fill both chambers, she'd need to restructure her job commitments in order to minimize travel and commit to choir practice. When she looked at the whole picture of goals she could satisfy through the sum of these activities, scaling back suddenly seemed more positive. The pieces were enough. And, she recognized, taking this path would require continued growth on her part—something she had forgotten she valued and which she now had the confidence to pursue strategically. Enduring success required enduring commitment.

Building Your Own Kaleidoscope

To create your own kaleidoscope, start by sketching out your framework. Take a piece of paper and draw four intersecting circles. Label them happiness, achievement, significance, and legacy. In each circle, list self, family, work, and community. This will enable you to do a full inventory of the mix and determine how each piece falls in the context of each major domain of your life. (See the exhibit “My Personal Kaleidoscope.”)

My Personal Kaleidoscope



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The people who achieved enduring success in our research used a kaleidoscope strategy to structure their aspirations. Not only did they continually add new activities to each of the four categories, but they also focused on creating a well-balanced big picture. If you take a minute to map an inventory of your successes so far, you'll quickly discover which areas need more attention.

My Personal Kaleidoscope

Next, quickly jot down examples of your successes or great satisfactions. You don't have to come up with one for every item in every circle—this is just a quick sketch of your beliefs about yourself, not the full picture. Don't spend time worrying about whether you should put a particular target next to a particular item. Just work with your first impulses.

Take your college degree as an example. You may feel that graduating from college was a major achievement, a benchmark in your overall career plans and something you will value for your whole life. Your degree represents a mastery of skills. You had to compete successfully to get there and get the grades. You felt satisfaction when you were successful. So you would write "college" in your achievement chamber, next to the word "work."

But what if college represented other things for you? Significance in your family life, for example, because your parents or spouse really valued what you were doing? In that case, you might also put college in your significance chamber, next to "family."

The point is not to compulsively divide your life into little circles and lists. Rather, it is to help you assess the various types of satisfactions you have already experienced and see what they add

up to. The answer is often more surprising or richer than you may have suspected.

Depending on your age, you might even want to fill out framework profiles for several periods in your life. Did you want the same things at 40 as you did at 20? Will you want the same things at 60? At 85? Could you ever fully abandon one of the categories and still feel that you were a success? (This is the trap that many retirees and those who downscale their careers to become full-time parents fall into.)

Now, metaphorically speaking, you can hold your kaleidoscope up to the light. Look at it objectively, and ask yourself:

1. How integrated is your profile? Are some of the domains empty? Are others too full? Is each realm of your identity—self, family, work, community—a depository of only one satisfaction, or is there a broader basis for success in each of these areas?

2. How varied is your profile? Where are most of your greatest successes and satisfactions so far? Where are the holes? The obsessions? Are the chambers and realms evolving or repeating the same things over and over?

3. What have you learned about what you actually do? Where is your time going? How does it speak to what you really want from success? Research into success has shown that one of the biggest causes of failure is an overreliance on one's greatest strengths. Are you favoring what you do best and neglecting your need for fulfillment in all four categories?

Here's how the kaleidoscope strategy helped John, the owner of a large real estate company, find enduring success. John was having trouble deciding what to do with his business. After a blowout with his teenage child and a series of relentless, debilitating headaches, he decided he had to cut back on his work. He had already bought a plane—against his family's wishes—and he had increased his time for himself, but he was still suffering. "I know I should sell part of this business for the sake of my happiness," he said, "but I just can't do it."

We suggested he try putting this sale in another category, one that seemed rather empty. Why not think about the sale as an active engagement in legacy rather than as a platform for happiness? The pieces fit. Legacy is about building on your achievements and values to help others succeed after you're gone. John remembered a young manager who had left the firm, someone who knew John's values and was quite accomplished in his own right. This

person would probably welcome the chance to head the new spin-off, and he'd be likely to extend the kind of business John had spent his life building. The buyers would need such a person, and John would be comfortable doing business with them.

After seeing the situation from a different perspective, John was more decisive about the sale and had a richer platform of concrete goals around which to structure the transaction: the terms in which legacy would be fulfilled, the new time frame for his own enjoyment of life, a revitalizing and more realistic set of achievement goals, and a sense of providing the space to be there for his daughter and wife without giving up all the challenges of the real estate business.

Identifying where his activities were located in the kaleidoscope gave John immediate insight into what he was seeking and getting from his efforts—as well as what was lacking. In channeling your efforts effectively toward what you really seek from success, it's critical to test your profile against your idealized view of yourself. What do you want your profile of accomplishments in each of the four categories to look like tomorrow? Next month? Over your lifetime?

The Kaleidoscope Strategy for Businesses

What makes for the enduring success of a company? In our view, businesses prosper when they enable individuals and ...



Getting to “Just Enough”

If you pay attention to the four categories and their relation to one another, you can enrich the potential for any activity to satisfy you on numerous dimensions, whether at work, in your leisure time, or in some other aspect of your life. The high achievers in our study were able to accomplish great things for themselves and others by recognizing they had multiple goals that were critical to their idea of real success and by being fully committed to whatever activity they were engaged in. By switching and linking, they limited their attention to one task, and when other needs pressed, they were able to make lightning fast changes of focus

and emotional energy. Instead of feeling cheated because they couldn't get it all, they were renewed by following the cycle of attention to each category.

How do you know when it's time to stop your work in one category and switch your attention to another? That's where the concept of "just enough" becomes critical. Conventional interpretations of "enough" don't capture its full potential. People tend to use the term to express dissatisfaction, as in, "That's it! I've had enough!" or as a code for mediocrity or passivity, as in, "If I'm just happy every day, that's enough." We mean something else by enough, closer to its root definition: occurring in sufficient quantity or quality to satisfy demands or needs. If you have a firm idea of the big picture in your kaleidoscope of success, it becomes easier to determine and appreciate "enough" in any one activity. Without losing your energy for high aspirations, you set reachable goals. "Just enough" is the antidote to society's addiction to the infinite "more." Seen in that light, it becomes a vehicle for actively making choices that allow you to do and get more, not less, through achieving satisfaction in more areas of your life.

"Just enough" is the antidote to society's addiction to the infinite "more."

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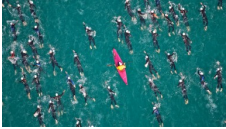
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