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Success In 5 Easy Lessons

G. Richard Shell

Everybody wants success.

As a senior faculty member at the Wharton School of Business, I am best known for my work in negotiation, persuasion, and interpersonal influence. I have written two popular books on these subjects and teach MBA and undergraduate courses. I have coached everyone from Navy SEALs and FBI hostage negotiators to top executives at Four Season Hotels and managers at Google.

Given what I do now, most people are surprised to learn that I did not start my academic career until I was thirty-seven and spent most of my twenties unemployed, much of the time deeply uncertain about who I was and what I wanted to do. But I count those years as the most important of my life. It was during that intense period of living with failure that I gained my first insights into the true meaning of success.

It is because of that journey that I hope I can help you hear your own inner voice more clearly, so you can discover what you should do next with your life. It is because of that journey that I was able to write my latest book, *Springboard: Launching Your Personal Search for SUCCESS*, from which I based the following **five lessons to a dramatically more successful life.**

LESSON 1: Avoid Pie-Eating Contests

At the beginning of your search for success, you will look around to see where everyone else is going. This is inevitable. But don't get sucked into taking someone else's journey or achieving goals other people set for you. A successful entrepreneur once told me and my students a true story that I have never forgotten. Soon after his business relocated from Alabama to Georgia in the mid-1970s, this fellow hired one of the top law firms in the state capital of Atlanta to help him with his legal work. As time passed, he came to rely on a particular law partner there as a trusted business adviser for his firm. After a few more years, with his company prospering, the entrepreneur decided it was time to hire a fulltime, in-house lawyer as the firm's general counsel. He went to his friend and asked if there were any lawyers he might recommend for the job.

"How about me?" the lawyer said.

"Well, that would be great," he replied. "But I will not be able to pay you anything close to what you are making at the law firm."

"That's OK," the lawyer said. "I'll take the job. You decide what you want to pay me."

The entrepreneur was curious and asked if there was something wrong with his friend's law firm work.

“No,” the lawyer said. “There is nothing wrong. It is just a question of more pie.”

“More pie?”

The lawyer explained. “Working the way I have all my life is like a pie-eating contest. I worked in high school to get into a great college. Then I worked in college to get into a great law school. Then I worked at law school to get a job at a top-flight law firm. Then I worked at the law firm to make partner. I’ve finally figured out that it is all just a big pie-eating contest. You win, and the prize is always... MORE PIE. Who wants that?”

The entrepreneur hired him on the spot and they have been working closely together ever since.

Lesson number one is one of the most basic lessons you can ever learn about success.

When everyone around you agrees on what success means, it is all too easy to blindly accept their ideas about what to do next. The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius once noted this truth in his Meditations, nearly 2,000 years ago. “I have often wondered,” he wrote, “how it is that every man loves himself more than all the rest of men, yet sets more value on others’ opinions than on his own.” If you allow others to define your goals for you, then there is a pretty good chance you will end up holding a prize you did not choose and do not want.

Define success for yourself. Then set out to achieve it.

LESSON 2: Value Respect More Than Recognition

As you set off along your path, your sense of being a “success” will depend to a great extent on the social approval you receive for the things you do. Philosopher Stephen Darwall once wrote a paper about the difference between good and bad forms of such social approval. It pays to understand the difference.

The bad kind of social approval is “Recognition Respect”—the feeling that comes when people who do not know you nevertheless treat you as if you are someone special. This is the emotional rush that celebrities get hooked on and that motivates them to do everything in their power to stay in the spotlight. Recognition Respect is like cotton candy. It gives you an immediate payoff, but it has no staying power or substance. Like a drug addict, you will need to rush out to find another fix as soon as the emotional “high” of being celebrated passes.

Darwall compared this with a deeper and more substantive type of social approval I call “Informed Respect.” Informed Respect comes from people who know you, understand your talents, and appreciate the excellence of your accomplishments—no matter how modest they may appear against the backdrop of the global market and the mass media. Informed respect is hard-earned and bestowed thoughtfully.

A highly successful college basketball coach, Mike Krzyzewski of Duke University, once made a wise comment about the kind of respect he seeks. He was asked by a Wall Street Journal reporter for his reaction to a talk-radio commentator who had second-guessed his coaching in a big game. “A lot of people have opinions,” he replied, but “they don’t have all the information that’s necessary to form valued opinions. I would rather listen to people who I trust. I react to that, not to talk shows and articles.”

Of course, at the root of both Recognition and Informed Respect is the deepest respect of all—Self Respect. If you find you are losing that, it is time to make a change—no matter how much others are praising you.

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LESSON 3: Don't Be Deceived By Potted Plants

Every now and then, you may be tempted to think you have “arrived”—that you are well and truly successful. This is a sure sign that you have lost your way.

I spent much of life between the ages of twenty and thirty unemployed and wondering what I should do with my life. The longer I was out of work, the more desperate I became to “be somebody.” During one extended period while I was living in Washington, D.C., I worked part time as a low-ranking member of house-painting crew. Painting houses gives you plenty of time to think and I spent much of mine in success fantasies. I became a world-famous poet. Then I was an important member of Congress. Then it would be time to paint the trim on another window sash.

One especially vivid daydream dominated all the rest. I had an impressive office on “K” Street, Washington’s central artery for lobbyists and consultants. In my office, a big, leafy potted plant stood next to an equally imposing window that looked out at the people, buses, and cars rushing by. I felt very important because I had a professional office with a potted plant.

In a roundabout way, this fantasy eventually came true almost exactly as I had imagined it—and taught me an important lesson.

Tired of painting houses, I launched a search for a white collar job by answering newspaper employment ads. One day, my search took me to a suburban office park where I was interviewed for a time-share real estate sales job by a well-dressed man who was eager to know what my “five-year plan” was. Of course, I did not have a five-year plan. I did not even have a five-day plan.

But he asked me an obvious question I had not thought about before: what could I do better than most people? My college major was in English and I could definitely use words better than many of my classmates. This insight changed my job search.

I started calling every number in the Washington, D.C. yellow pages related to a job that might require writing skills: magazines, newspapers, trade association newsletters, public relationships firms, fund raising groups, and so on. I finally hit pay dirt when I talked my way into an interview with a fund-raising consulting firm. They needed someone who could write. I passed the test. Miraculously, when they ushered me into my new office on my first day at work, I discovered that I had a potted plant and a window looking out on K Street.

I learned three important career lessons from this episode. First, fantasies are fun, but taking action is what gets you a job. Second, it helped to be looking for work doing something I did better than most people—in my case, writing. That gave me a story to tell.

The final and most important lesson came soon after starting that job.

I learned that success is a process, not a place.

My new job gave me more money and status than painting houses had. But it gave me no more satisfaction. In fact, within a few months, I felt like an imposter—an actor posing as a white-collar professional.

Soon after that, I left the country and entered on a two-year quest to discover what success was really about. What I discovered is that it comes from within—your genuine motivations, capabilities, interests, and responsibilities. When you get clear on these things, you have success in your heart—not in a fantasy of a big office with a potted plant.

LESSON 4: Be Unhappy (sometimes)

Even if you can resist the temptation to think of success as a place rather than a process, you may still be led off course by your emotions. Watch out! Emotions are always temporary. They can be unfaithful, unreliable guides.

When you ask most people what they mean by the word “success,” they think for a moment and answer with a single word: “happiness.” I am sympathetic to that answer. Who wants to live a life marked by relentless unhappiness?

But there is a problem. First, the research on happiness shows conclusively that it comes and goes no matter what happens in your life. Even prisoners on death row have moments of happiness! So that seems like an odd (and notably easy) way to measure true success in your life.

Second, people who begin seeking happiness as their main goal eventually start playing defense most of the time—they begin protecting what they have instead of staying open and curious about what might come next. They become unwilling to take risks lest they experience the emotion they have come to fear most: “unhappiness.” Memory expert Josh Foer (author of *Moonwalking with Einstein*) has a name for this place. He calls it the “OK Plateau.” The OK Plateau is the enemy of true success. It is what happens when life is “good enough” and you start to make decisions based on the fear of losing what you have instead of striving to learn, do, experience, love, and accomplish more. Avoiding unhappiness blocks you from taking actions that could bring you the deeper and more meaningful happiness most people associate with true, hard-earned success.

“Every now and then, you may be tempted to think you have “arrived”—that you are well and truly successful. This is a sure sign that you have lost your way.”

So here is the lesson: you need to let yourself become dissatisfied—indeed you must learn to recognize and embrace the unhappiness that comes with dissatisfaction—if you want to succeed. A former student of mine named Eric has lived a life that illustrates the importance of “constructive dissatisfaction” while simultaneously honoring the moments of happiness that always come into a busy, successful life. Eric came to business school with a math background and an eight years of high school teaching behind him. He had reached the “OK Plateau” in his teaching career, had become dissatisfied, and was seeking a change that would give him more glamour and excitement. He soon picked up on the idea of becoming a high-performing management consultant—a lucrative career track that many graduate business students seek.

Eric landed a consulting job in a major city and was feeling very successful indeed—for about six months. Then he had to embrace his dissatisfaction again—an especially painful thing to do when you have just invested two years of your life and several hundred thousand dollars in making a career change. One of his first projects at his consulting firm involved an elaborate, time-consuming analysis for a large corporate client about how to save money. The project ended in a recommendation that the firm print its customer invoices on two-sided rather than one-sided paper. He realized that consulting was really not the dream job he had imagined. And his dissatisfaction threw him back to searching for his real interests and passions—only now with more urgency.

His reassessment led him to several crucial insights. First, he wanted to be his own boss. Second, he wanted to build something that would use his unique combination of talents and experiences. He had grown up in a home where his parents' entrepreneurial spirit and risk-taking were “normal” aspects of family life and dinner-table talk. His dissatisfaction led him back to those roots and he began thinking about what sorts of enterprises he could start.

Ultimately, he began kicking around a crazy idea to create a first-of-its-kind “public education boarding school” that could provide low-income high school children with a protective, 24/7 environment with a rigorous curriculum and a staff of teachers as committed to excellence as he was. That challenge would use his educational experience, his business acumen, and his passion for teaching. Within a year, he and an equally talented and motivated partner had started up their first school and were on their way to major success. He received a “Use Your Life” award from Oprah Winfrey on her television show, appeared on ABC’s Nightline, and his school was the subject a special segment on CBS’s 60 Minutes. Most important, his model worked. In 2010, every single one of their graduates—all coming from poor neighborhoods where only 33 percent of students even graduate from high school—was admitted to college, including such schools as Duke, Brown, and the University of Maryland.

Is Eric happy? Sure—he has a wonderful family and experiences lots of satisfaction from seeing his project helping so many lives. But he became successful by embracing his dissatisfaction, first as a teacher and then as a management consultant. He used that to power his search for hard, challenging work that has benefitted both himself and others.

LESSON 5: Keep It Simple: Remember the Advice of the Wise Angel

Success is basically pretty simple. When you start thinking it is complicated, take a break and remember the story I am about to tell you.

An older, working-class individual once showed up at a Wharton School faculty seminar. Members of the public are welcome to these events, but few ever attend. The presentation that day was on whether higher incomes make people happier. When the time came for questions, this man raised his rough, carpenter's hand and commented, "I am just a member of the public . . . But you mention the word 'happiness' and I am confused. What has that to do with anything you were saying about income? As I see it, happiness is just three things: good health, meaningful work, and love. You have that, you are happy."

The seminar room fell very quiet as we all waited to see what the presenter would say.

A few seconds of embarrassed silence followed until the person who was hosting the presentation stepped in, thanked the man for his comment, and shifted the conversation to a question related to the way the data had been collected. After a few more questions and answers along those lines, the man slipped out of the room and disappeared.

I later came to call this man the Wise Angel. He had stepped into our lives for just few moments and told us the truth about success and happiness. He put all our complicated research and high-priced intellectualizing to shame. Then he had exited as quietly as he had come. But I have never forgotten the message he left behind.

Although the Wise Angel was talking about “happiness,” he was really commenting on the deepest form of it that I equate with true success. Without good health, it is hard to be fully productive. Without some honest, loving relationships in your life, your world quickly falls out of balance. There are few emotions as debilitating as loneliness. Sustained effort on any task is nearly impossible to maintain when you feel cut off and unloved.

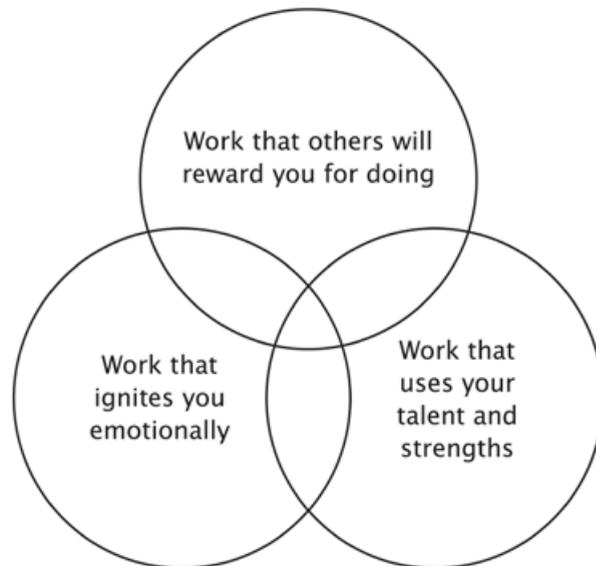
“You need to let yourself become dissatisfied—indeed you must learn to recognize and embrace the unhappiness that comes with dissatisfaction—if you want to succeed.”

Finally, if you really care about success, you ought to be seeking meaningful work—not just a job or a career.

I have spent a lot of time studying meaningful work since the day I met the Wise Angel. Here is what I figured out so far. Look at the simple diagram below and note where the three circles overlap.

The spot in the middle is where I think you will find meaningful work. I call this the “sweet spot” of success. The “rewards” circle at the top is what gives you external motivation. These could be rewards from gaining respect, the ability to earn an honest living, or the independence that comes from making your own way in the world. The “talents” circle on the right includes all the things you can do slightly better than most other people. Maybe you are a good writer or a good

Meaningful Work



organizer. Maybe you have a gift for putting other people at ease or inspiring them to work hard. Whatever your talents are, work that is meaningful will use those talents and enable you to get better and better at doing what you already do well.

The “ignites you emotionally” circle on the left speaks to your inner, intrinsic motivations. Perhaps you gain special satisfaction from helping other people or from doing something from beginning to end and having the control to see it through to a high quality conclusion. Maybe your passions are aroused by working as part of a high-performance team or in the feelings of patriotism that come from serving in uniform. Whatever they are, your version of meaningful work will include these inner motivations and gain energy from your using them.

Meaningful work is what happens when you put all three of these factors in motion in a given, sustained activity. Moreover, it comes in many forms. It can be what you do for a living. Many careers include activities that are deeply meaningful to the people who are lucky enough to have discovered their life’s work. But it can also be what you do as a hobby or on weekends when you have a chance to do volunteer work. Sometimes meaningful work takes the form of teaching your children about a passion you have—with the reward being the looks on their faces as they come to understand and share your interests and unique perspective on the world.

By the way, don't worry if your current situation does not include a lot of meaningful work. That is simply a chance to put Lesson #4 to work. Use your dissatisfaction and unhappiness to motivate a genuine change. Get moving.

Everything I have said here is true. If you follow these five steps, your life will get better and you will begin having more powerful effects on those around you. And every day you are fortunate enough to be alive, continue your search for success. **You will be amazed at what you find.** 📖

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | G. Richard Shell is the Thomas Gerrity Professor of Legal Studies, Business Ethics, and Management at the Wharton School. The creator of Wharton's popular "Success Course," his previous books include the award-winning *Bargaining for Advantage: Negotiation Strategies for Reasonable People* and, with Mario Mussa, *The Art of Woo: Using Strategic Persuasion to Sell Your Ideas*. He lives with his family near Philadelphia.

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