

The Common Denominator of Success

Adapted from Albert E.N. Gray

Several years ago I was brought face to face with the very disturbing realization that I was trying to research and explain what it took to be a success in sales, without knowing myself what the secret of success really was. And that, naturally, made me realize that regardless of what other knowledge I might have brought to my job and to others, I was definitely lacking in the most important knowledge of all.

Of course, like most of us, I had been brought up on the belief that the secret of success [in design school] is hard work, despite this, I had seen so many people who work hard and don't succeed and others who succeed without working hard. Because of this, I had become convinced that hard work was not the real secret, though in most cases it might be one of the requirements.

Given my background and training, I began trying to explain success by reviewing all relative research on such topics as motivation, behavior, performance and job satisfaction. Next, I set out on a voyage of discovery, which carried me through thousands of books, magazine and newspaper articles, biographies and autobiographies. I then conducted numerous empirical research studies in over a 20-year period.

After a time, theory, research results, and hearsay overwhelmed me. Then, one day as I was day dreaming, everything I had done came to focus. My mind focused on the realization that the secret I was trying to discover lay not only in what people did, but also in what made them do it.

I realized further that the secret for which I was searching must not only apply to every definition of success, but since it must apply to everyone to whom it is offered, it must also apply to everyone who had ever been successful. In short, I was looking for the common denominator of success.

But this common denominator of success is so big, so powerful, and so vitally important to your future and mine that I'm not going to review all of the writings and research, which have brought me to the common denominator of success. I'm just going to tell you.

The common denominator of success – the secret of success of every [design student] who has ever been successful – lies in the fact that the person formed the habit of doing things that others don't like to do. It's just as true as it sounds and it's just as simple as it seems. You can hold it up to the light, you can put it to the acid test, and you can kick it around until it's worn out, but when you are all through with it, it will still be the common denominator of success, whether you like it or not.

It will explain why people have come into [the CSUS Graphic Design Program] with every apparent qualification for success and then given us our most disappointing failures. It explains why others have come in and achieved outstanding success in spite of many obvious and discouraging handicaps.

And since it will also explain your future, it would seem to be a mighty good idea for you to use it to determine just what sort of a future you are going to have. In other words, let's take this big, all-embracing secret and boil it down to fit you.

If the secret of success lies in forming the habit of doing things that others don't like to do, let's start the boiling-down process by determining what are the things that others don't like to do. **The things that others don't like to do are the very things that you and I and other human beings, including successful [design students], naturally don't like to do.** In other words, we've got to realize right from the start that success is something which is achieved by the minority of people and is therefore unnatural and is not achieved by following what we normally like and don't like, nor by being guided by natural preferences and prejudices.

The things that others don't like to do, in general, are too many and too obvious for us to discuss here, and so, since our success is to be achieved in [our design education], let us move on to a discussion of the things that we as [design students] don't like to do. Here too, the things we don't like to do are too many to permit specific discussion, but they can all be disposed of by saying that they all come from one basic dislike peculiar to [design work].

Perhaps you have been discouraged by a feeling that you were born subject to certain dislikes peculiar to you, with which successful [students in your GPHD 25 class] do not possess. Perhaps you have wondered why it is that our [best student peers] seem to like to do things that you don't like to do. **They don't!** And I think this is the most encouraging statement I have ever offered to a group of [design students].

But if they don't like to do these things, then why do they do them? **Because successful [design students] do things they do not like to do, they are able to achieve their goals. They are not influenced by how they reach these goals, but rather by the results they can obtain.** Successful [design students] are influenced by the desire for pleasing results. Others are influenced by the desire for pleasing methods and are inclined to be satisfied with such results as can be obtained by doing things they like to do.

Purpose

Why are successful [design students] able to do things they don't like to do while others are not? **Because successful [students] have a purpose strong enough to make them form the habit of doing things they don't like to do.**

When Top [Designers] Slump

Sometimes even our best [students] get into a slump. When a person goes into a slump, it simply means he/she has reached a point at which, for the time being, the things he/she doesn't like to do have become more important than the reasons for doing them. And may I pause to suggest to you [dept chairs], [program coordinators], and [professors] that when one of your good [students] goes into a slump, the less you talk about production and the more you talk about "purpose," the sooner you will pull the person out of the slump.

It's Not Enough

Many people with whom I have discussed this common denominator of success have said at this point, "But [I'm a commuter student; I'm just trying to get a degree to improve my circumstance]. Isn't that enough of a purpose?"

No it isn't. It isn't a sufficiently strong purpose to make you form the habit of doing the things you don't like to do for the very simple reasons that **it is easier to adjust ourselves to the hardships of [getting by with a mediocre school performance] than it is to adjust ourselves to the hardships of [excelling in design school].** If you doubt me, just think of all the things you are willing to go without in order to avoid doing the things you don't like to do. All of which seems to prove that the strength, which holds you to your purpose, is not your own strength but the strength of the purpose itself.

Habit Is The Key

Now let's see why habit belongs so importantly in this common denominator for success.

People are creatures of habit. Every single qualification for success is acquired through habit. **People form habits and habits form futures.** If you do not deliberately form good habits, then unconsciously you will form bad ones. You are the kind of person you are because you have formed the habit of being that kind of person. The only way you can change is through habit.

Perhaps you have attended [design classes] in the past and have determined to do things that would make you successful or more successful only to find your decision or determination waning at just the time when it should be put into effect or practice.

Here's the answer. Any resolution or decision you make is simply a promise to yourself, which isn't worth a nickel unless you have formed the habit of making and keeping that promise. And you won't form the habit of making it and keeping it unless you link it with a definite purpose that can be accomplished by keeping it right at the beginning. In other words, any resolution or decision you make today has to be made again tomorrow, and the next day and the next, and so on. This decision not only has to be made each day, but it has to be kept each day, for if you miss one day in the making or the keeping of it, you have to go back and begin all over again. But if you continue the process of making it each morning and keeping it each day, you will finally wake up some morning a different person in a different world, and you will wonder what has happened to you and the world you used to live in.

You Have A Purpose

Here's what has happened. Your resolution or decision has become a habit and you don't have to make it on this particular morning. The reason you seem like a different person living in a different world is because you have, for the first time in your life, become master of yourself and your likes and dislikes. This is done by surrendering to your purpose in life. That is why behind every success there must be a "purpose," and that is what makes purpose so important to your future. For in the last analysis, your future is not going to depend on economic conditions or outside influences of circumstances over which you have no control. Your future is going to depend on your purpose in life. So let's talk purpose.

What Is One's purpose?

Purpose is something set up as an object or end to be attained. Occasionally purpose is referred to as someone's personal mission statement. In setting your purpose, or mission statement, first create an imaginary ideal life you would like to live, in every respect. Your ideal life should be based upon who you are and where you are going in life. Let yourself dream big dreams. Let your mind float freely into the future.

Wants Or Needs?

Human beings are motivated by needs and wants. A person's **needs** result from a lack of something desirable, such as food, car, clothes, or shelter. **Wants** are needs learned by the person. They are often seen as emotional or psychological and not practical. For example, people need transportation but want a car instead of a horse or a bicycle. Most people want a luxury car instead of an inexpensive used car or truck. Instead of watching the game on television, some want season tickets at the Cowboy's Irving Stadium. Instead of a five-room house some want a twelve-room house on two acres of land. Instead of working until one's 80, some want to retire at an earlier time in their life mainly because they have not made their job satisfying for themselves.

Make Your Purpose Based Upon Wants.

Remember, **needs are logical while wants are emotional**. Your needs only push you just so far. When your needs are satisfied, they will stop pushing you. If, however, **your purpose is in terms of wants and desires**, then your wants and desires will keep pushing you long after needs are satisfied and until your wants and desires are fulfilled.

Recently I was talking with a young man who long ago discovered the common denominator of success without realizing it. He had a definite purpose in life and it was definitely a sentimental or emotional purpose. He wanted his boy to go through college without having to work his way through as he had done. He wanted to avoid for his little girl the hardships, which his own sister had to face in her childhood. He

wanted his wife and the mother of his children to enjoy the luxuries, comforts, and even necessities, which had been denied to his own mother. **He was willing to form the habit of doing things he didn't like to do in order to accomplish this purpose.**

Not to discourage him, but rather to have him encourage me, I said to him, "Aren't you going a little too far with this thing? There's no logical reason why your son shouldn't be willing and able to work his way through college just as his father did. Of course he'll miss many of the things that you missed in your college life and he'll probably have heartaches and disappointments. But if he's any good, he'll come through in the need just as you did. And there's no logical reason why you should slave in order that your daughter may have things which your own sister wasn't able to have, or in order that your wife can enjoy comforts and luxuries that she wasn't used to before she married you."

He looked at me with a rather pitying look and said, "But Mr. Gray, there's no inspiration in logic. There's no courage in logic. There's not even happiness in logic. There's only satisfaction. The only place logic has in my life is in realization that the more I am willing to do for my wife and children, the more I shall be able to do for myself."

I imagine, after hearing that story, you won't have to be told how to find your purpose or how to identify it or how to surrender to it. If it's a big purpose, you will be big in its accomplishment. If it's an unselfish purpose, you will be unselfish in accomplishing it. And if it's an honest purpose, you will be honest and honorable of it.

But as long as you live, don't forget that while you may succeed beyond your fondest hopes and your greatest expectations, **it is impossible to succeed beyond the purpose for which you are sacrificing.** Furthermore, your surrender will not be complete until you have formed the habit of doing the things that others don't like to do.