

# In the **FIRST** Place...

INSIGHTS FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

## How We Define Success



BY RUSS JONES

One of the more difficult concepts with which we wrestle daily in business, perhaps without explicitly recognizing it, is how we define success. Webster's New Dictionary defines success as 1). The favorable or prosperous termination of attempts or endeavors, 2). The gaining of wealth, position, fame, rank, etc. or 3). A successful performance or achievement. These popular definitions meet with wide acceptance.

In business, all three definitions may apply. When one thinks in terms of career success, certainly the second definition (the gaining of wealth, position, fame, rank, etc.) comes to mind. And, when one thinks of organizational success, both the first definition (the favorable or prosperous termination of attempts or endeavors) and the third (successful performance or achievement) are applicable.

Nevertheless, there is a problem with these definitions from a career perspective. They lead to the conclusion that "the position held, the honors received, or the level of wealth attained" is the most important part. From the organization's perspective, this is appropriate because the result is the most important part. But, the failure to distinguish between the definitions and perspectives of the individual and those of the organization is a major cause of many of the problems in our business environment today. For the individual, that the

definition be stated in terms of the journey or the process rather than the result.

For example, an individual defined as "the best I can be" rather than defined as a success because "I am an officer" or "I have attained more wealth and honors than the people with whom I started." Another reason for feeling unsuccessful is job content itself. The job might either be limiting or perhaps has remained static for a long time. In either case, the challenge is gone.

People also feel unsuccessful when they are not involved in the mainstream of their business. They believe that they are not informed, involved, challenged, recognized or rewarded for successful performance. In effect, they are outside the mainstream and are de-motivated because of it.

Individuals may feel unsuccessful if they lack managerial, technical, communication or interpersonal skills. There may be a lack of desire or a reduced work ethic caused by any one of these issues. Other possible reasons for feeling unsuccessful lie in choosing not to relocate, or be retrained or continue education so as to be able to go where the jobs are. There also is the issue of refusing to assume risk. Having a low-risk tolerance helps avoid feelings of being unsuccessful because the risk of change serves as a deterrent. However, having a high-risk orientation

simply exacerbates the problem.

Certain organizational issues can also cause feelings of being unsuccessful. These include consolidations, restructurings, cultural changes, strategic redirections, and certain staff/line distinctions that negatively impact the job force.

Feeling unsuccessful may eventually lead to job burn-out. Burn-out is manifested by feeling trapped, defeated and helpless. Another manifestation is a change in behavior, such that a person who previously was decisive and results oriented now lacks assertiveness, decisiveness and an ability to achieve results. Unfortunately, this person does not recognize what is happening and therefore cannot take corrective action. Finally, burn-out may be manifested by inconsistency in responses, such that an individual will either over or under-react. Such inconsistent responses render the person irresponsible and undependable.

Another definition of success, and that is especially appropriate to the business world, is "making the maximum contribution that one is capable of making, and therefore optimizing one's potential." While doing so, the person is a success regardless of the outcome. It really is helpful to get encouragement, support, and recognition from others, but it is even more important that, within ourselves, we recognize that we are only successful if we

are maximizing our contribution and potential.

Another favorite definition of success is "making progress towards achieving a worthwhile goal." This clearly sets the definition as a dynamic process rather than an end result. Also not in this definition the lack of status being achieved or position being obtained. Such achievement and attainment equate to one end result. By many definitions, success achieved is historical and not current. Maximizing one's contribution and potential, or making progress toward a worthwhile goal, is intrinsically oriented in the present as well as to the future.

In any event, how we define success influences how we measure ourselves. How we measure ourselves strongly influences how we feel about ourselves. If we use the wrong measure, our self-image may be distorted. We need to select the definition of success that fits our needs and our environment.

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