

THE 100 SIMPLE SECRETS OF
Successful People

David Niven, Ph.D.



What Scientists Have Learned
and How You Can Use it

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A Note to Readers

Each of the 100 entries presented here is based on the research conclusions of scientists studying success. Each entry contains a key research finding, complemented by advice and an example that follow from the finding. The research conclusions presented in each entry are based on a meta-analysis of research on success, which means that each conclusion is derived from the work of multiple researchers studying the same topic. To enable the reader to find further information on each topic, a reference to a supporting study is included in each entry, and a bibliography of recent work on success has also been provided.

Introduction

We gathered once a week for Professor Brian Lang's seminar. The topic was a little hard to define, but the purpose was to prepare us for the required year-long senior research papers we would begin working on during the following semester.

All of us were writing papers on topics in our own majors, and among the twenty students in the course nineteen different majors were represented. One student was studying the civil rights record of the Johnson Administration, another the effects of lengthening the schoolday for elementary students, another the question of whether a computer could be taught to write a song.

Although the course was meant to help us pursue our chosen interest, it wasn't about any one of them in particular. We were given no new information about Lyndon Johnson, no lectures on the attention span of seven-year-olds.

Instead, the course was about the process of undertaking a journey. While each of us was heading off in a different direction, Professor Lang hoped we would all reach the same destination.

The course explored themes of persistence and commitment and the unexpected discoveries that might be made along the way. "No outcome, no discovery, is really an accident; it is the product of the effort invested in the process," Professor Lang would say.

We continued to meet while we were researching and writing our projects. During class, the professor would ask each of us

about our progress, what had excited or interested us, and what roadblocks we'd encountered. Nearly all of us would recount with excitement the latest new idea we'd been struck by or the indispensable book we'd just read.

One student would usually hem and haw and try to avoid making any kind of progress report. Eventually Professor Lang insisted he give us a full update, and he instead admitted he really hadn't been able to work consistently on the project. The professor's face was full of disappointment.

The student defiantly offered, "But you don't understand! I've got work coming out of my rear end."

"Have you had a doctor look at that?" Professor Lang asked.

The rest of us had been caught up in the tension of the moment and were then overwhelmed with laughter. But it was no laughing matter to Professor Lang, for he had no tolerance for not trying.

"Knowledge isn't going to track you down and force itself upon you," he had told us more than once.

For him, these research projects were a chance not only to learn intensely about the subject we had chosen, but also to learn about ourselves—to commit ourselves to a considerable task and to deal with the good and the bad, the discoveries and the setbacks. Professor Lang didn't really care if we could prove a computer could write a song or that twenty minutes tacked onto a schoolday would make kids better at fractions, but he cared passionately that we give our projects everything we were capable of, because if we could do that now, we could do it for the rest of our lives. And if we did so, we would succeed.

After the class stopped laughing at the doctor joke, Brian Lang turned reflective. He said, both to the slacking student and the rest of us, "What can any person do in the face of all the world's challenges? He or she can try."

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As I conducted the research for this book, combing through thousands of studies on successful people, I thought often about Professor Lang's course. Just as Professor Lang saw common elements necessary to creating a good research project, no matter what the topic, scientists have uncovered a set of practices, principles, and beliefs that are necessary for success, no matter what your goals in life are.

The 100 Simple Secrets of Successful People presents the conclusions of scientists who have studied success in all walks of life. Each entry presents the core scientific finding, a real-world example of the principle, and the basic advice you should follow to increase your chances of success in your life.

1

Competence Starts with Feeling Competent

How good are you at what you do? Do you have tests or periodic evaluations or some other means to measure your performance? Surely, there is an objective way to demonstrate whether you are good at what you do and whether you should consider yourself a success.

Actually, people who do not think they are good at what they do—who do not think they are capable of success or leadership—do not change their opinion even when they are presented with indicators of success. Instead, their self-doubts overrule evidence to the contrary.

Don't wait for your next evaluation to improve your judgment of yourself, because feelings are not dependent on facts—and feelings of competence actually start with the feelings and then produce the competence.



Ross, a dancer from Springfield, Missouri, dreams of making it to Broadway. His road to dancing glory began with local amateur productions, the kinds of productions in which auditions take place in front of all the other performers trying out. Ross

found the experience daunting; it was like being examined by a doctor with all your peers watching. “I was so scared. I felt like I had just come out of the cornfields,” Ross said.

Sometimes he succeeded, and sometimes he didn't, but Ross was able to try out for different parts in various productions and gain tremendously from the experience. “I have more confidence about my auditioning technique now that I have done it in front of so many people so many times.”

When he tried out for the first time for a professional touring company, he won a spot in a production of *Footloose*.

Ross has one explanation for his immediate success in landing a professional part: “I had confidence. If you want to do it, you have to really want it and believe in it. You have to make it happen. You can't sit back and hope that someone is going to help you along.”



For most people studied, the first step toward improving their job performance had nothing to do with the job itself but instead with improving how they felt about themselves. In fact, for eight in ten people, self-image matters more in how they rate their job performance than does their actual job performance.

Gribble 2000

2

It's Not How Hard You Try

Work hard and you will be rewarded. It sounds simple.

But remember what it was like studying for a test? Some kids studied forever and did poorly. Some studied hardly at all and made great grades.

You can spend incredible effort inefficiently and gain nothing. Or, you can spend modest efforts efficiently and be rewarded.

The purpose of what you do is to make progress, not just to expend yourself.



Achenbach's Pastries was a Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, institution. The family-owned bakery had a loyal customer base and had operated profitably for more than four decades.

In the 1990s the owners decided to expand—to offer deli sandwiches and other goods and to add new locations for both retail and wholesale sales.

The bakery's owners had never worked harder in their lives than they did after the expansion. And in return for all their hard work, they got less money and the threat of bankruptcy because they could not keep up with debts incurred in the expansion.

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Earl Hess, a retired business executive, provided capital to keep the company in business and then ultimately bought the entire operation. He looked at things as an objective observer and found that the bakery was doomed by inefficiencies. “They had too many products. Ninety percent of sales came from 10 percent of the products. They were losing their aprons making low-volume items.”

Hess says when he took over the company he knew: “These people couldn’t possibly have worked any harder, but they could have worked smarter.”



Effort is the single most overrated trait in producing success. People rank it as the best predictor of success when in reality it is one of the least significant factors. Effort, by itself, is a terrible predictor of outcomes because inefficient effort is a tremendous source of discouragement, leaving people to conclude that they can never succeed since even expending maximum effort has not produced results.

Scherneck 1998

3

Creativity Comes from Within

Everyone wants to think of something new—solve a problem no one else can solve, offer a valuable idea no else has conceived of. And every business wants to encourage its employees to have the next great idea.

So when a business offers its employees a bonus for creative ideas, a flood of great, original thoughts should come pouring in. Right?

We think that creativity, like any other task, can be bought and sold. But creativity is not the same as hard work and effort; it requires genuine inspiration. It is the product of a mind thoroughly intrigued by a question, a situation, a possibility.

Thus, creativity comes not in exchange for money or rewards but when we focus our attention on something because we want to.



Japan Railways East had the contract to build a bullet train between Tokyo and Nagano to be put in place in time for the 1998 Winter Olympics.

Unfortunately, tunnels built by the company through the mountains kept filling with water. The company brought in a

team of engineers, who were highly paid to come up with the best solution. The engineers analyzed the problems and drew up an extensive set of plans to build an expensive drain and a system of aqueducts to divert the water out of the tunnels.

A thirsty maintenance worker one day came up with a different solution when he bent over and took a large swallow of the tunnel water. It tasted great, better than the bottled water he had in his lunch pail.

He told his boss they should bottle it and sell it as premium mineral water.

Thus was born Oshimizu bottled water, which the railroad sells from vending machines on its platforms and has expanded to selling by home delivery.

A huge cost was transformed into a huge profit, all by looking at the situation differently.



Experiments offering money in exchange for creative solutions to problems find that monetary rewards are unrelated to the capacity of people to offer original ideas. Instead, creativity is most frequently the product of genuine interest in the problem and a belief that creativity will be personally appreciated by superiors.

Cooper, Clasen, Silva-Jalonen, and Butler 1999

4

Take Small Victories

Pursuing your goals is much like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. While you ultimately seek the final outcome, you still have to work piece by piece.

Since you will spend most of your time trying to make progress, you must enjoy what you are doing in order to finish.

Take joy from the process, and use the small successes to fuel your continued efforts.



Louis Minella spent a career planning every detail of the presentation of department stores. He knew everything about the business of catching the customer's eye and using the layout to maximize sales.

After thirty-one years in the business, he took early retirement. And then he looked for something worthwhile to do.

Louis decided to open a mailing center, where people can ship packages, buy boxes, make copies, and send faxes. It was a major adjustment. "I used to be just one member of the team in an international organization, but now I'm in charge of everything."

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The hands-on difference was most significant. “Before, I was dealing with group managers. I used to issue reports and orders, but I didn’t personally do the work or do anything other than tell other people what to do. I’m in reality now.”

He takes great joy from the daily hurdles overcome, like adjusting the hours of his star sixty-six-year-old employee to keep her content or fixing the leaking ink in the postage meter machine or figuring out how to copy a seven-hundred-page document.

“It’s a different ball game here, but it’s tremendously satisfying to learn every little thing that your business needs.”



Life satisfaction is 22 percent more likely for those with a steady stream of minor accomplishments than those who express interest only in major accomplishments.

Orlick 1998

5

You Can't Force Yourself to Like Broccoli

Certain jobs require a distinct personality. There is little point in pursuing a job in communications if you are not an extroverted person who loves to interact with people. If your soul bursts with passionate creativity, you are not likely to be content with a job in accounting.

Personalities are like shoe sizes. They are not subject to our choice or preference, but they can be occasionally fudged—with uncomfortable consequences.

It is neither an accomplishment nor a fault to acknowledge that some people can speak before large audiences and be exhilarated by the experience while others would be petrified. Some people can study an equation for years and be fascinated by it, and others would long for human interaction and variety.

Realize who you are—what your true personality is—and choose a future that fits it.



Hardly a day goes by without at least one of his clients refusing to work with him. In fact, sometimes they spit up on him. But photographer Jean Deer loves his job.

He has taken hundreds of children's portraits, and he is well acquainted with all the tricks of the trade to make a baby smile. Jean's an expert in every funny face and noise imaginable.

"When it's over, everyone—me, the parents, and the children—are exhausted, but that's usually a good sign."

Jean found that getting babies to flash their smiles wasn't the only way to get a great picture and that a grumpy baby was just another source of inspiration. "I was taking a photo once of this infant who literally wanted nothing to do with me. He would not look up, just stared at the floor." Jean got down on the floor with him, took the picture from a perspective he'd never used before, and wound up with one of the best pictures he'd ever taken.

The job requires two major traits, Jean believes. "Not everyone can just hang out a shingle and call himself a photographer. It's all a matter of being patient and energetic and then capturing the right moment."



Even as people experience different phases of their lives, including career and family changes, their underlying personality remains constant after about age sixteen.

Barto 1998

6

Resist the Urge to Be Average

Everywhere around you are average people. They entice you into being more like them by offering their acceptance and by leading you to believe that everyone else is already more like them than like you.

But the “average person sales pitch” leaves out that you will be sacrificing your goals, individuality, and unique ideas and that you will lead a life determined more by the preferences of the group than by you.



“A person who wants to be a leader must turn his back to the crowd,” says the sign on Ty Underwood’s desk. Ty runs a job placement service that works with laid-off and chronically underemployed workers.

“When I got here there was an attitude that this was all a show to keep the agency’s funding. We’d show up, have the clients come in to fill out some papers, then send them on their way. Nobody behaving as if there was important work to be done, nobody behaving as if there was potential to be tapped here.”

His first task was to change everything. To two-thirds of the staff, he minced no words: “Here’s your resignation. Sign it.”

Now each day begins with the premise that “Everyone who walks through this door can do more. That goes for the counselors and the clients.”

Two years later, Ty has taken an office he considered an embarrassment and turned it into a model, with a job placement record of 71 percent.



Psychologists have observed that bad habits can spread through an office like a contagious disease. Employees tend to mirror the bad behaviors of their co-workers, with factors as diverse as low morale, poor working habits, and theft from the employer all rising based on the negative behavior of peers.

Greene 1999

7

There Is Plenty of Time

Whatever our dreams are, we practically hear a clock ticking. Our family, our friends, even the media all make us wonder when we are finally going to be “there” and why we aren’t there yet.

But there are no age restrictions on success. It takes as long as it takes, and when you reach it, you won’t reject success because you’re not the right age for it.



“There are people on top, and then there are people who don’t matter. That’s how I felt,” admits Nathan, who works in advertising in New York. “I looked down on myself for not being where I wanted to be, and I suffered through every day like it was my personal humiliation.

“I didn’t take pride in what I did. I practically created a fictional job description for myself whenever anybody asked me what I really did.”

Nathan says that in his business, “there’s nothing but perception. We don’t make better mousetraps, we don’t make anything. We sell perception, and our jobs are perception. It was like I heard this clock ticking, with each day bringing me closer to failure.”

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Nathan sought help from a career coach who asked him who he was really competing with and why. “When I said I guess I was competing with everybody in the company because I wanted to be on top, she said, ‘Well, if you were on top of the company, then you’d be competing with every other company to be bigger than them.’ Basically, she made me see that there was no way to win this contest and that I could either sit back and enjoy the ride or keep trying to race to a place I could never get to.”

Nathan’s perspective shifted. “Now I try to keep my focus on doing the best work I can, and I know that I’ll get where I’m going when I get there.”



Age is unrelated to people’s commitment to their job and their level of job performance.

Tuuli and Karisalmi 1999

8

It's Never Just One Thing

When we think of attaining success, we often think of achieving a specific goal. Whether it's landing a new account, getting a promotion, or being offered a certain salary, we think that with just one more achievement we will feel successful.

But people do not change their assessments of themselves following an achievement. People react to the larger picture.

When you land the account or get the promotion or a raise, the same nagging concerns that led you to think you desperately needed one more achievement will undermine the value you place on that achievement.

Ultimate success neither comes with nor rides on your next achievement. Feelings of success come with the whole of your efforts, your beliefs, your experiences, your life. Success is based on the total package, not the ribbon on the package.



They don't travel in private jets and limousines. There are no roadies to unpack their equipment. They make no outrageous demands for huge dressing rooms or pampered treatment.

The members of the band Rustic Overtones are just happy to play their alternative rock music in clubs across the country. And when they are finished playing for the night, they pack up everything themselves in their rusty van.

Rustic Overtones plays 250 shows a year, has had its music played on 200 radio stations, and has sold 34,000 copies of its CDs.

But the band doesn't have a contract with a major record company, and much of its pay for gigs is used to offset travel expenses.

Will they make it? Drummer Tony McNaboe and the rest of the band certainly hope so, but he explains, "If you don't enjoy every minute of this, then you're in the wrong business. We play for crowds, we play for each other, we'll find a street corner and play for people walking by. We love making music, and whether we get a big record contract and headline a big sold-out show or not, we'll be making music."



An event may be crucial in the short term, but researchers find that people's enduring self-concept—their view of who they are and what they are capable of—is not tied to any single positive or negative event. Instead, a self-concept is composed of a combination of beliefs and feelings based on long-term experiences both at home and at work.

Black 1999

9

Don't Keep Fighting Your First Battle

People absorb a tremendous amount of information and learn significant lessons from their earliest experiences. We begin our careers as almost empty notebooks, and as we progress our mind fills with notations and observations. The first pages of our mental notebook are filled with our first experiences.

The potential for difficulty arises, however, as we try to apply those early lessons to situations in which they are not relevant.

Take note of experience, but realize there are situations where your experiences no longer apply.



Schwinn Bicycle was the leader in the industry for a hundred years.

Edward Schwinn, the fourth generation of Schwinn in the business, took control in 1979. Thirteen years later, the bicycle company was on life support, having watched its market share fall by 60 percent.

Analysts attribute the decline of the company to a refusal to live in the present. Because it was family owned, and always had been, Edward Schwinn refused outside financing when the

company began to show signs of weakness. Because Schwinn was *the name* in bicycles, Edward Schwinn refused to spend money on keeping the brand name in consumers' consciousness. Because Schwinn was always the kind of company that operated on a handshake and long-term commitment, Edward Schwinn agreed to outsource all their manufacturing to the same Chinese supplier, Giant Manufacturing, without adequately protecting Schwinn's long-term interests.

By the end, in 1992, Schwinn Bicycle was seventy-five million dollars in debt and losing a million per month. No investor would come near the company until it could be picked up for next to nothing in a bankruptcy sale. Product recognition among children dropped to close to zero. And Giant Manufacturing ended its deal with Schwinn and began producing its own bicycles in plants originally paid for with Schwinn money.

The company declared bankruptcy, and the Schwinn family lost all control over the family's business. Edward Schwinn's explanation for the fall? "We are where we are." To which one family member responded, "Where we are is out of business because you were asleep at the wheel."



Research on financial managers finds that 95 percent display a particular commitment to sectors in which they experienced their first success. Ultimately, this tendency leads to missed buying opportunities in other segments of the market and unrealistic enthusiasm for their chosen sector.

Goltz 1999

10

Change Is Possible, Not Easy

Commercials on tv tell you all the time that you can change yourself. In thirty seconds, the commercial actors can get smarter, thinner, prettier, richer. But this fantasy world only sets us up for a fall.

We hear about the possibilities for wonderful changes people can make in their lives, and we want to duplicate those results. When we try and are not quickly rewarded, we actually wind up feeling worse than we did before we started.

The problem is, of course, that change is possible, but it does not come immediately. Nobody wants to sell us on a program for change that will take years because of course no one would buy it. But it does take years to accomplish the most important changes.

When you entered the first grade, you didn't expect to learn a second language, algebra, and the history of the War of 1812 all in the first week. You began an education that took more than a decade and provided you with incredible positive change.

Positive change in your life will not be finished today, but it can start today.



Charlie's job is about change. He is brought in to smooth the transition when one company acquires another. It has given him a special perspective on the subject of change.

“Companies have cultures—ways of doing things, ways of life for the employees. These cultures aren't easy to change. Sometimes these cultures hold companies back from doing what they are capable of, and sometimes they make it impossible for two separate businesses to merge and exist together.”

What Charlie does is study the cultures of the companies with an eye toward protecting the future. “When you have a culture that is not serving the long-term needs of the company, it needs to be changed—but changed carefully. If you change things too drastically, or change the culture in a negative, threatening way, then there will be high turnover, and you won't have changed the culture as much as destroyed it.

“Healthy change is a long-term process, whether for a company or the people in it,” Charlie says.



The decision to make a change offers wonderful feelings of control and optimism, but those are short-lived if the change is not accomplished. Repeated efforts at self-change, characterized by an expectation of an unrealistically high payoff in an unrealistically short time, actually reduce satisfaction with our lives by 40 percent.

Polivy and Herman 2000

Seek Input from Your Opposites

There are starters and finishers. There are big-picture people and detail people. Some are great at conceiving plans but lose interest in following through on them, while others are tenacious in seeing a project through but ill suited to dreaming up the next idea.

You benefit when you involve people in your projects who have traits and perspective that are the opposite of yours.



Dr. Howard Murad is a Los Angeles–area dermatologist who concluded that many of his patients’ concerns about appearance fell at the intersection of medicine and beauty care.

He believed no one in either business fully appreciated that potential. “I wanted to address the patient’s concerns, and if that meant using a facialist instead of laser surgery, then that’s what I’d do.”

Dr. Murad says the important question is, “If you had no disease, would you really be healthy? The answer often is no. What you need to be healthy is a sense of well-being, a sense of the ability to function at your highest level.”

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Twenty years after merging health and beauty care, Dr. Murad's business selling cosmetic products and spa treatments brings in \$60 million a year. But he says none of this would have been possible if not for the fact that "I'm open-minded, I look at things differently, and I bring in people who know things I don't."



Teams in the workplace composed of people with differing personalities are 14 percent more productive than teams composed of more compatible individuals.

Fisher, Macrosson, and Wong 1998

12

Write Down the Directions

If you were taking a complicated route out of town, you would write down the directions.

But if you were considering the future path of your life, your goals, and what you needed to do to achieve them, you probably wouldn't write any of it down. Think of it—the most significant journey of your life, and you probably won't put a word of the directions on paper.

Writing down your plans, goals, and ideas makes them more real for you. Every step you take to define what you want and what you need to do to get it increases the chances that you will actually pursue these goals and someday achieve them.



Harry is a career counselor who works with professionals from various fields who feel unfulfilled. Harry doesn't just ask them what they really want; he asks them, "What's your quest?" He explores with people not what they *want* to do but what they *need* to do.

Harry often finds people unprepared to answer his question. "You ask people what they really need to do, and it strikes most