



Episode 75: How to Know You're Being Successful

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Here is the starting question today: How do you know when you're being successful?

It's a big question, and it's an important one for many of us. Success means achieving what you've set out to, meeting others' expectations, and feeling proud of what you've accomplished.

Whatever goals you have for yourself, I'm guessing you want to be successful. You want to have that internal sense of validation, the inner voice telling yourself "Well done!" Or maybe you want others to say, yes, you were successful. Many of us rely on external validation from bosses, colleagues, and our personal support system.

It's only natural that you want to have success. Our culture values success -- whether in school with grades, achievements, and things like higher education, money, and status.

The concept of success is a complicated one to untangle, as it's often tied up in our sense of self and self-worth. And it's something we do want to think about for ourselves. "How do I know if I'm being successful in life?" is a deep question that requires reflection and being honest with yourself about your values and purpose.

In addition to our reflecting on our personal success, we also have professional definitions of success that are important to us. At work, success is defined within the context of your role, the organization, and your stakeholders. "How do I know if I'm being successful at work?" is an important question to answer, because there are expectations on you in that setting.

Thinking about success in all its forms is an opportunity for more clarity, and when we have more clarity, it's easier to move forward. When we have a clear road map outlining where we're going, we can relax more and enjoy the journey. When we have a clear picture about what the outcome looks like, it's easier to make decisions and communicate our Yeses and Nos.

Reflecting on the idea of success and defining it for us is something we often forget to do. The biggest obstacle is busyness. Being busy gets in the way of taking time to ponder big ideas.

And, it's important to make the time to reflect periodically about how things are going. At work, performance reviews and annual reviews are an opportunity to review what success looked like the previous year, what outcomes were achieved, and what next success will look like.

What about in our personal life? How often do you conduct personal reviews to see what you've accomplished, what successes you want to note and celebrate, and choose what's next?

Taking the time to clarify your relationship with and definition of success matters and helps you create your life more intentionally.

Today's topic is a powerful question because questions are tools that help your thinking.

The benefit of powerful questions is that they quickly focus your thinking, which is helpful when approaching a complicated and often emotionally-laden topic like success. Today's question is a place to start.

Ready? Here's the question you can use to coach yourself and others when you want to better understand whether and how you're being successful:

What would success look like?

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The great thing about this question is that it can be used in a variety of settings.

Let's take the setting of work and let's say you're starting a project. Of course you want to be successful. Before you start, ask yourself (and your team), "What would success look like?"

Then imagine and talk through what success will look like – think specifically about what you'll have created, what questions you'll have answered, and what problems you'll have solved. The key is to do this in detail. The clearer you are about what you're working toward, the easier it is for everyone's brain to understand and make it happen.

Too often, defining success at the outset gets shortchanged. We neglect to take the time to flesh out all of the details. This is a disservice to us and to others. When there's a lack of clarity, people too easily get lost, misunderstand, or go off in their own direction.

At work, you can also use this question when you step into a new role. What would success look like in 3 months, 6 months, or 1 year? Clarity is always our goal, and getting clear with everyone's expectations at the outset helps people focus their energies most effectively.

Thinking about what success will look like often necessitates a change in perspective. This is particularly true, for example, when people advance from being an individual contributor to a people leader.

The mindset of success as an individual contributor is very different than the mindset of success as a people leader or someone in a senior and more strategic role.

I was talking with one client about how to update his mental model of success now that he's a more senior leader. He said to me: "I used to define success as knowing everything and having a finger on all of the details. Now, I realize that success is defined differently. Success now means finding the right experts and bringing them in. It's removing obstacles for other people. Success is also taking time to think about the big picture and then communicating that more broadly."

He realized that he needed to let go of his old definitions of success and operate from a new definition.

When we update our definition of success, it also allows us to identify measures and metrics that we can use to track our progress. For example, if you're a new people manager, and you're defining success as

coaching others, one metric might be the number of coaching questions you ask each day. Or you could measure success by counting the number of coaching conversations you have in a week.

Clarity around how we define success lets us more easily create metrics. When we have metrics and gather data, then we're collecting evidence of our success, in the way we defined it.

The question, "What would success look like?" also matters in our personal life. I know that for me, at the end of my life, I would like to feel like my time here was well lived. That I mattered to people and lived my purpose. That I collected fun and interesting experiences. In other words, I would want to know that I achieved my personal definition of success.

Here's my invitation to you. When you have the time and space for some deep thinking, ask yourself the question:

At the end of my life, what would success look like?

Let yourself be open to the images and thoughts that come to mind. You might also use the helpful coaching add-on phrase, "What else?" and ask yourself the question more deeply. After you've thought about some of the ways you'd define success, ask, "And what else would success look like? What else? What else?"

Going deeper often reveals more hidden longings or places where we have a secret desire to be bold.

"What else would success look like?" is a powerful question because it reminds us of what matters to us, and it also probes into what we long for. Any time we understand ourselves more deeply, we're increasing our self-awareness. And increased awareness is the first step to then making an intentional choice.

When we are aware of and clear about the vision of success we're working toward, it's easier to do and say things that move us closer to that outcome. And, in life, that is what's in our control.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you want to get clear on how you define success, please reach out. Email me at deb@debelbaum.com or go to my website debelbaum.com to schedule a consult. I look forward to it. I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you're confident you're moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!