

Defining Success

One of the more colorful quotes to come out of the United States Supreme Court involves the justices' struggle with defining obscenity. During the deliberations one judge admitted having trouble determining an exact definition, remarking "I can't define it, but I know it when I see it". All too often our definition of success is like the esteemed judge's definition of obscenity. We don't know how to define it, but we know it when we see it. While this may work for pornography, it does not work for businesses. The better we define how we will determine success, the more likely we are to experience it.

The definition of success, as presented in the dictionary, is "the attainment of an objective, or of wealth, or of fame, or of position". The synonyms are "victory", "achievement", "accomplishment", "prosperity", "winning", and "attainment". This is a rather straightforward view of success, and one that most likely needs adjusting as we make considerations for the dynamics of the real world.

Certainly the parameters of the definition of success have a great deal to do with who is doing the defining. The creation of a perception of success has a lot to do with how the metrics for measuring and determining success are set. Often we inhibit our prospects for success by allowing the determining measures to be set too high. Conversely, there are also times when we dilute the perception of what success is by placing the bar too low. A realistic set of objectives, placed against fair systems of measurement, are practical and reasonable parameters for the determination of success.

This having been said, it is critical that the varying perceptions of what constitutes success be kept in mind when the criteria and determining factors are established. For example, customers may view success differently than the sales force, just as middle management may view it differently than upper management. These differences are a function of the "know it when I see it" syndrome, and do not invalidate or validate any one perception. It could be that the culture of the company dictates that the customers perception or upper management's perception is the view that must prevail, but that only adds authority to the position, not validity.

Perhaps the best way to define success is to understand the components that contribute to success regardless of who is qualifying and defining the results. Some things you can do to contribute to success are:

1. Have Clear Definition of Objectives - The better defined the end result is the easier it will be to measure against the expectations created by the setting of the goals. It is best to set the goals just below ambitious and just above simple. This satisfies those who wish to push your team to exceed, while making sure that the objectives are reasonable and within reach.

2. Create a Winning Team - Make sure you have the skills you need to reach your objectives, that each member of the team feels invested and engaged, and that each one has the capacity to invest the time and effort required to reach the goals.

3. Provide Strong Leadership - Success is driven by strong leadership, which can be defined as the ability to create a vision, enlist others to that vision, and then motivate them to obtain the vision.

4. Roll With the Punches - If everything goes just as it should you don't have success – you have a miracle. There will be things that do not go as planned, on time, or according to budget. Knowing this is the case and planning for it is a key factor in goal attainment.

5. Develop a Consensus - Chances are your road to success cuts through someone's backyard, meaning that you are bound to step on someone's toes as you march toward your goal. Make sure that you have consensus prior to embarking on your mission, including the support of the company's management. Then, make sure you have contingency plans for when the dissidents start setting up road blocks.

6. Keep an Eye on the Calendar - Certainly one way success is defined is by time. Projects that meet their objectives, but are months late in doing so, are often defined as partial successes at best. Make sure you keep an eye on the calendar and that the timeline you set for your project was reasonable and sufficient.

7. Predict the Unpredictable - You are correct in protesting that you do not have a crystal ball and your clairvoyant skills are not fully developed. So rely instead on your experience and allow your planning skills to create alternative scenarios even for events you cannot even imagine might occur.

8. Keep the Momentum - For long term projects especially, but also for shorter ones, there is a tendency to become apathetic and allow a project to proceed forward on the momentum you created at the beginning. Once a project begins to slow down, revving it up again can prove to be very difficult. Keep the momentum rolling.

9. Wait to Declare Success – One of the major pitfalls of success is our rush to declare we've succeeded. It is better to hold off on your declarations of success until you have allowed sufficient time for the project to be tested and evaluated. The temptation to pack up and declare the project completed is understandable, but a premature declaration can lead to an erasure of many of the genuine accomplishments if the project is discovered to have defects.

It is natural that we all strive to succeed. The path to success is important because it determines whether the success will ever be realized. It is critical that we recognize not only the factors that help us to succeed, but also the varying perceptions that ultimately determine whether or not we have actually succeeded.