

The First Rungs on the Success Ladder

We live in abundant times. This presents an interesting conundrum when it comes to succeeding.

Success is not the result of pure luck or genetics. Success is a discipline that can be learned. You can deliberately build your ability to succeed. Pick a challenge. One that's hard but not too hard. Persist until you figure out how to overcome that challenge. It builds confidence that you take with you to the next, slightly bigger challenge. That's how you learn success.

But what if you begin with a challenge that's too big?

You can just as easily learn failure. I don't mean learn *from* failure, which is what happens while you're persisting at a challenge that's big enough but not too big. I mean learn failure as a habit or mindset. If you take on a challenge outside your current capabilities, you will in all likelihood get disheartened, internalize your insufficiency, and extrapolate it broadly.

Thus the conundrum of an age of abundance.

If we accept some form of Maslow's hierarchy, the most basic human challenges of food, shelter, and safety are taken care of. We're born into the middle of the pyramid. This is not a bad thing. I don't want my kids to have to scavenge for food and clothing. But because success compounds, those born into abundance can miss out on the first, most basic forms of success, and then find the rest out of reach.

The extreme example of the kid born into great wealth and status is familiar to us from books and movies. The first challenge that kid is faced with is self-actualization. All the smaller battles have been won on her behalf. That is a really massive challenge. No wonder there are so many dysfunctional trust fund babies.

But it's not just the uber-elite. A lot of young people feel like failures and struggle to succeed at anything. In the world of careers, with which I am very familiar, you have people in their twenties taking on their first job and experiencing existential trauma because they feel the need to find work that speaks to their deepest calling. They're starting with self-actualization, which is too big a challenge.

They never had to fight the small battle of just learning to finish a task without praise. They never had to fight the slightly bigger battle of earning their first five dollars. They never overcame the challenge of learning to show up on time and not get fired. They never learned to overcome escalating social challenges like being ignored or misunderstood.

Well-intentioned parents save their kids from all the small, early challenges and point the kid to big ones. The kid who never learned how to cope with not being chosen first in basketball is told “Get into an elite university”, or, “Become a doctor”, or, “Make me proud.”

So a lot of people are wandering around feeling lost because they don’t know how to “make a dent in the universe”. It’s not because they are failures. It’s because they skipped too many steps. Figure out how to walk before you try to run.

Imagine if we tried to help babies out by building mechanical legs and hooking them up to IVs. “Poor kid was crawling on the floor, barely mobile, and totally reliant upon his mother for food. We’ve solved that, now he can move around and tackle bigger, more creative problems!”

It would destroy the development process. The kid would never walk, never bond, and probably have digestive health and psychological issues forever.

When we remove grunt work, low pay jobs, skinned knees, hurt feelings on the playground, and all the small challenges that kids confront first, we remove the first rungs on the success ladder. When we place big epic battles for meaning as the first our kids ever face, we make failure easier to learn than success.

Fight smaller battles. Win them. Then fight slightly bigger battles.

Don’t worry about slaying dragons until you learn to swat flies.