

THE MOTIVATION MYTH



The
MOTIVATION
Myth

How High Achievers Really
Set Themselves Up to Win

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*To my wife, who is better, smarter, and kinder than I am . . .
and who constantly inspires me to want to be better than I am.
And to my kids, who are already better people
than I could ever hope to be.*

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INTRODUCTION

You Can Do—and *Be*— So Much More Than You Think

When I worked in manufacturing for R.R. Donnelley, the world's largest commercial printer, I desperately—and I do mean desperately—wanted to become a plant manager; the closest I came was running manufacturing operations for a small, privately owned company. I spent years trying to get one—just one—short story published; the closest I came was . . . Well, I never came close. (Looking back, deservedly so.) I have dozens of failures to my name. I've tried and failed, over and over.

Even worse, I've let many goals go without even trying to achieve them. I thought about them, I dreamed about them, I imagined what it would feel like to accomplish them . . . but I never even got started.

In both scenarios I spent a lot of time trying to rev myself up into a motivated state. I'd been told success was all about

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mind-set, and I wanted to lock in the optimal psychological state before the rubber met the road. We can all remember those times when we were hit with a lightning bolt of inspiration, whether to work out or to start learning French—and we can also remember how that urge never produced any action.

I was in the grip of an insidious myth. I thought motivation was a prerequisite to starting a tedious learning process—a spark necessary to get me going. But motivation is really a result. Motivation is the fire that starts burning after you manually, painfully, coax it into existence, and it feeds on the satisfaction of seeing yourself make progress. The problem with waiting for motivation to strike is that it almost never comes with enough voltage to actually get you started.

Granted, sometimes motivation will strike like a hammer. Minutes or hours later, though, you've lost your enthusiasm, partly because a lightning-bolt burst of motivation is like a sugar rush: It feels great but is impossible to maintain, and when you come down you actually feel worse. Rah-rah speeches and inspirational quotes and fire-walking challenges may help you picture yourself at the top of the mountain with your arms raised in triumph, but the effect is fleeting. After the glow is gone, you're left standing by yourself at the bottom of that same mountain, hugely intimidated by all the steps you need to climb.

So you sit, and dwell, and sulk, and wish, and hope, and maybe even think about saving up for Tony Robbins's next seminar . . . but even that sounds too hard.

HOW SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE APPROACH MOTIVATION

I've met plenty of successful people. Yes, many of them are smart. Yes, some of them are creative. Yes, they're often talented. But none of those traits is crucial to their success. The gene cards we are dealt are just a starting point; nearly every successful person I know started on the downside of advantage. Humble beginnings can create the perfect foundation for success, because starting at the bottom creates almost endless opportunities to enjoy small successes.

Confused? That's okay. The key is to understand how motivation works.

There is only one recipe for gaining motivation: success.

Specifically, the dopamine hits we get when we observe ourselves making progress.

Not huge, life-changing successes. Those come all too infrequently, if ever. If you want to stay motivated, if you want to stay on track, if you want to keep making progress toward the things you hope to achieve, the key is to enjoy small, seemingly minor successes—but on a regular basis. If you're trying to learn a language, it's fun when you realize you can count to twenty. If you're trying to learn an instrument, it's fun when you realize you can read simple sheet music. If you're trying to learn to code, it's fun to realize that silly little program you wrote actually works. Small successes are fun—and motivating.

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That's why you already have everything you need.

That's why motivation isn't something you *have*. Motivation is something you get, from yourself, automatically, from feeling good about achieving small successes.

Success is a process. Success is repeatable and predictable. Success has less to do with hoping and praying and strategizing than with diligently doing (after a little strategizing, sure): doing the right things, the right way, over and over and over.

It's easy to look back on a path to greatness and assume that every vision was clear, every plan was perfect, every step was executed flawlessly, and tremendous success was a foregone conclusion.

It wasn't. Every extremely successful person I know never expected to achieve as much as they have. (Many still can't believe it.) Almost to a person, one day they woke up and were stunned to see how far they had come.

Why were they so surprised by their success? They were busy doing. They didn't focus on what they did not have. They focused on doing the work, day after day after day, to get them to where they hoped to go.

When you consistently do the right things, success is predictable. Success is inevitable. You just can't think about it too much. No obsessing allowed.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HAPPINESS AND SUCCESS

The motivation myth makes us unhappy for two reasons. First, it leads to a sin of commission. A person who self-identifies as a failure, who regularly quits before reaching the finish line, is a chronically unhappy person. But it also causes a sin of omission. We aren't mindfully enjoying one of the most rewarding experiences on earth: slowly growing stronger, or more skillful, or more wise.

Like when my grandfather bought a racehorse.

I wasn't even a teenager, but even I knew it was a terrible decision. A racehorse was a luxury he and my grandmother surely could not afford. But at least ongoing costs were low, because he lived on a farm. That's a justification I'm sure he floated by my grandmother.

Over the next year he would scrape together entry fees and race the horse with little success at small local tracks. One was no better than an open field rutted by the pounding of hooves. Another featured an announcer who placed his PA system on the back of his truck and powered it with a generator that almost drowned out the sound of his voice. (I can still remember him saying, "As you folks know, in Virginia it's illegal to bet at a racetrack . . . but if you folks mosey away from the track and on down to that big old oak tree over yonder, I'm sure someone will

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be happy to accommodate you.” And I can still remember the muscles in my father’s face tightening in response.)

Then one day the impossible happened. After somehow talking one of the better jockeys into riding his horse—“somehow” surely including slipping the man an extra forty dollars, a princely sum for the ride—his horse finished in second place finish at the now long-defunct Goochland Races, held at the county fairgrounds less than ten miles from where my grandfather lived.

After the race he stood at the finish line and held up the small silver plate so we could take his picture. Then we led the horse back around the sandy track toward the barn area as some of people on the outside of the rail congratulated him.

I was only twelve, but even I could see a noticeable difference in the way he walked. For those moments he stood taller, carrying himself with a clear sense of accomplishment, dignity, and pride.

Only years later did I realize why my grandfather had bought the horse. He desperately wanted to be someone. He wanted to matter.

That’s a wish we all share. For the most part, that’s why we change careers, or start businesses, or play an instrument, or go back to school. That’s we run for local office, volunteer at a charity, or are active in church.

We want to matter . . . but when we focus solely on mattering to other people—when we focus on seeing the reflection of our

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worth in the eyes of others—the difference that feeling makes in our lives is often fleeting.

By the time we got back to the farm, my grandfather's glow had faded. Sure, he was still happy, but all the external benefits of that small success—the smiles, the words of congratulation, the nods from friends and strangers—had disappeared.

At the end of my grandfather's racing journey, he was left with what we are all left with, no matter what we may have accomplished and no matter how much praise or recognition we may have received from others. The accomplishment, no matter how amazing, is just the cherry on top of the fulfillment cake.

If your goal has long been to build a business that does \$10 million in sales, the second you hit that target you feel amazing—but that moment of achievement is just one moment. If your goal has long been to run a marathon, the second you cross the finish line you feel amazing—but that moment of achievement is just one moment.

The road to a target, to a goal, to a finish line is filled with countless hours of work and determination and sacrifice . . . and countless opportunities to feel good about what you have accomplished, each and every day along the way.

A slice of satisfaction, fulfillment, and happiness can be found in the achievement . . . but the real source of consistent, lasting happiness lies in the process. My grandfather wasn't involved in the process. Granted, he bought the horse . . . but then he jumped to the end. He skipped all the steps in between:

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training the horse, conditioning the horse, developing the horse's speed slowly but surely, teaching it not just how to run but how to race.

He didn't give himself the chance to enjoy the daily doses of fulfillment that come from engaging in the process. Accomplishing something, no matter how small the task, makes us feel better about ourselves. That's why to-do lists are so popular. (Many people write down really easy tasks—or tasks they've already completed—just so they can scratch them off.)

Incredibly successful people set a goal and then focus all their attention on the process necessary to achieve that goal. They set a goal and then, surprisingly, they forget the goal.

Sure, the goal is still out there. But what they care about most is what they need to do today—and when they accomplish that, they are happy about today. They feel good about today.

They feel good about themselves, because they've accomplished what they set out to do today, and that sense of accomplishment gives them all the motivation they need to do what they need to do when tomorrow comes—because success, even tiny, incremental success, is the best motivational tool of all.

When you savor the small victories, you get to feel good about yourself every day, because you no longer feel compelled to compare the distance between here and there. You don't have to wait for "someday" to feel good about yourself; if you do what you planned to do today, you're a winner.

When I was training for long cycling events, I often rode up

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mountains. I always hated the climbs . . . but I loved completing them, and years later I still love knowing I completed them. Think about anything you've done that was extremely hard, and how you felt afterward, and you'll know exactly what I mean.

For years I missed out on the happiness and fulfillment that come from accomplishing all the little steps in my various goal-achievement (actually, goal-failure) journeys.

You don't have to.

But it won't be easy. Success—lasting, fulfilling, meaningful success—never is.

Want to start a business? Don't be fooled by the work-at-home hype. Launching a successful business will make you wonder what the words "free time" could possibly mean.

Want to rise to the top of your organization? Don't be fooled by the work-life-balance fluff. Tremendous effort and dedication are required.

Want to run a marathon? Forget some sixty-day shortcut system that promises maximum results from minimal input. Life doesn't work that way.

To accomplish anything worthwhile, and especially to achieve a goal others say is impossible, you have to work your ass off. There are no shortcuts. The only way is the hard way.

Yet there are plenty of ways to make the process fun. There are plenty of ways to make the process uplifting. There are plenty of ways to enjoy every step of the journey . . . as well as that final step onto your personal podium.

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Want to be happier? Want to be more successful at everything you choose to pursue? The paths to both are one and the same.

You don't need to wait until you can find more time; you have all the time you need. You don't need to wait until you can find more money; money never drives success. (Though if you so choose, money can be the result of success.) And you absolutely do not need more motivation.

You don't need to wait to find your passion; if you follow this book's program, your passions—plural intended, as you'll soon see—will find you.

You will stand strong. You won't back off. You won't back down. You'll make smart decisions. You won't focus on what you don't have, because what you *do* have—however little it may seem—is more than enough.

And you will find that the process, not just the result but the *process* involved in becoming something that you once dreamed of, will also make you feel awesome about yourself—each and every day.

Some people are successful. Some people are happy.

You can be both.

Here's how.