

# Searching for Success that Lasts

By Dawie and Hester Gouws

Why are some high achievers unsatisfied and unhappy, while others lead contented and fulfilling lives? This question moved Laura Nash and Howard Stevenson (N&S) of Harvard Business School to study a large number of people in senior positions, focusing on what was needed to gain lasting success in their lives – as perceived by others and experienced by themselves.

First, they studied the consequences of applying conventional wisdom: to excel to the absolute maximum in one chosen field of endeavour, often by disregarding other concerns and obligations in your life – in the belief that, once “successful” in this single-minded quest, the other things will follow. What they found was that many people who had “maximised” one all-absorbing endeavour did not feel successful, contented or fulfilled. Instead, they often felt disappointed, empty and regretful.

By analysing numerous cases of people who experienced all-round, meaningful and enduring success in their lives N&S identified four life areas (“categories” in their terminology) that seemed to be the minimum in which one had to succeed in order to feel successful. They are:

- *Happiness* – feelings of pleasure, joy, contentment with your life
- *Achievement* – accomplishments that are the result of focused and competent personal efforts and that compare favourably with the accomplishments of others striving for similar goals
- *Significance* – the sense that you have made a positive impact on people you care about
- *Legacy* – giving substance to your values and accomplishments in a way that help others find their own future success

The authors also note that each of the four categories contains four life dimensions or facets, namely self, work, family and community. One might think that happiness relates mostly to self, achievement to work, significance to family, and legacy to community or society. However, the really successful people in the N&S study seemed to exploit every one of their engagements for its potential to contribute to their experiencing success in all four of the categories: happiness, achievement, significance, and legacy.

For example, suppose you have a strong interest in music, coupled to high musical talent. Playing the instrument of your choice could provide release and pleasure (happiness), be an on-going challenge to master and excel (achievement), enable you to join an orchestra that provides deep satisfaction to its audiences (significance), and stimulate your children to appreciate, perhaps even to produce good music, also after you have gone (legacy.)

Truly successful people have the ability to quickly switch from one meaningful task in one category to another in another category. For this they need a finely developed sense of “just enough (for now)”. Of knowing when they have made just enough of an investment of time and energy in an activity to progress (sufficiently for now) towards one goal, so they could switch to the next.

This means maintaining a dynamic (i.e. continuously shifting) balance between the pursuit of several meaningful goals, all in the course of a day.

Since we ourselves, as well as our circumstances (the context in which we operate), are changing all the time, it follows that our goals will not remain static. One's goals at age 40 are different from what they were at age 30, or will be at age 50.

This also means that no other person's formula for success in each of the four categories can be appropriate for me. We are unique individuals, each with our own values and beliefs, skills and talents, emotional needs, and contexts. We need a good understanding of what these are to make wise goal choices

Reference:

Laura Nash & Howard Stevenson: *Just enough – Tools for creating success in your work and life* (John Wiley & Sons, 2004).