

COLUMBIA COLLEGE

SEVEN PRINCIPLES THAT LEAD TO PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS

As a result of his research, Shawn Anchor developed a list of seven principles that contribute to greater happiness and success at work and in life.

The following pages provide a brief summary of the research that has been conducted in this area.

1. Reacting to Bad Experiences

From our earliest experiences in life, such as learning to eat with a spoon, learning to walk, or learning to ride a bike, we experience failure. At a young age we realize we have two choices – to try again or to give up (at least for now). As we grow older, we start to realize that we actually have a third choice – to try to understand what we may have done wrong, search for alternative paths, and decide which path will yield the greatest opportunity for success with the least chance of failure.¹

Children and young adults who are taught to step back after experiencing a bad situation or failure and take the necessary time to assess what they experienced, seek alternative approaches, and consider alternative solutions, while understanding the consequences of each, tend to be more successful than those who do not. In fact, considerable research has shown that individuals who learn to see each failure as an opportunity to grow, actually experience more growth. Scientists call this phenomenon adversarial growth or post-traumatic growth.² Some negative experiences can yield greater growth. Examples of this growth include increases in spirituality, compassion for others, openness, enhanced personal strength, self-confidence, heightened appreciation, and greater empathy.³

It is important to note that while two people may experience the same negative situation, one may grow from it while the other may not. The reason for this is that the successful person has learned to be more accepting of a situation. They are more optimistic about the outcome, they have learned to focus on the situation rather than avoiding it or denying it, and they reinterpret the negative situation in a positive way. Successful individuals do not define themselves by what has happened to them (as victims) but by what they can gain out of what they experienced. These individuals try to make something good out of a bad situation. Some even see adversity, not as a stumbling block, but as a stepping stone or opportunity to make a better future.⁴

Some organizations actually prefer to hire people who have overcome failure, hardship, trauma, etc. in an area directly related to the position they will be working in because of the understanding, insight, and empathy they may possess.⁵

Throughout our life we all will experience incidents which have negative impacts on us. Some of these may be very simple in nature, while others may be more complex. For example, we may have gone to a store to buy something on special, only to find they were out of stock. As a result of this experience, we respond in one of two ways. First, we can take this situation and say, “Just my bad luck!” or “Why does this always happen to me?” or “I am mad that this store did this just to take advantage of me.” On the other hand, we can

say “Gee, that’s too bad – maybe they have an alternate product that is just as good or better” or “Maybe I can see what else they sell that I need to buy” or “It looks like they purchased less of this product than they needed and now they’re losing valuable sales – too bad for them”. While negative or unfortunate situations will happen to us throughout our lives, each of us has the ability to react to each situation in a negative way or a positive way. Those who choose to react in a positive way tend to be more successful.⁶

People who interpret negative experiences they have in a negative way tend to be pessimistic in life and are not nearly as successful as those who do not. Researchers have found that people who are able to take their negative experiences and quickly bounce back are more successful. Researchers have also found that the more optimistic an individual is, the more success they will experience. Is the glass half full or half empty? An optimist will always say it is half full. They are the small engine pulling a huge load up the hill saying, “I think I can, I think I can.” Being an optimist does not mean you will always overcome every adversity in life, but it does mean you will do better than a pessimist.⁷

2. Being in Greater Control

When we are faced with more challenges than we can handle, we tend to become overwhelmed. Our stress level goes up, we tend to overreact (fight or flight), and, generally speaking, we lose control. This is not the time we make our best decisions. We perform less efficiently and effectively at this time.

Researchers have found that people who feel in control are more satisfied in nearly every aspect of their life. They have lower levels of stress, experience less conflict at work and home, and remain in their current position longer.¹ These people have what psychologists refer to as a greater **internal locus of control**. People who possess a greater internal locus of control believe that they are more in control of their decisions and behaviour in life and, as a result, tend to work harder. This results in greater academic achievement, career achievement, happier relationships; they are better communicators, more attentive listeners, team members, and problem solvers.² All of this results in greater success at work as well as life.

One study found that just putting nursing home residents in control of looking after their own plants improved their happiness to such an extent that their mortality rate dropped by 50%.³

People who want to gain control of their work and/or life can engage in any number of activities. For example:

- Psychologist Shawn Achor recommends writing out, in your own words, what is causing you to feel out of control and stressed. Alternately, you can choose to share your feelings with a close friend or confidant.⁴
- Another approach is to divide a page in half. On one half of the page, write a list of those things you are in control of. On the other half, write the things you have no control over. This will enable you to separate those stressors that you have no control over from the stressors you do have control over. This allows you to focus our energy on the things you can change and learn to accept the things you cannot change (for example, none of us can change the weather – at least not easily).
- Alternately, select a small easy to solve stressor and solve it first. Once the first stressor is dealt with, move to the second and then the third. As you eliminate each stressor,

your confidence will begin to build and generally your stress will start to go down. The important point to remember here is that when we are overwhelmed with more challenges than we can handle at one time, we need to focus on the small things first and then attend to larger and larger things as we move forward.

In other words, while our goal may be to climb a mountain, which may seem almost impossible, what we need to do first is begin by taking one step at a time. Companies have used this process by taking one small step of improvement after another. It is called continuous improvement, and it has helped many organizations achieve greater success than they ever believed possible.

Research also shows that when people are allowed to set their own goals, they are more committed to achieve them (**internal locus of control** or **intrinsic motivation**), than those who have their goals set for them by others (**external locus of control** or **extrinsic motivation**).

3. Seeing Beyond What Is in Front of Us

As a result of life experiences, most of us have developed the ability to view our surroundings and see what is wrong. While this is a valuable skill to develop, it may cause us to look at things we experience with a critical eye more often. Unfortunately, we may become so good at focusing on the negative that we miss the positive. Without realizing it, some people become very good at seeing only the negative view of the world around them. This can cause others to stay away from them. These negative people may start to lose their ability to see what is good even if it is right in front of their eyes.¹

It is important for us all to develop the ability to see what is right and good as well as what is wrong. If we begin to view our world only in a negative manner, we become more stressed, less creative, less motivated, less productive, less happy, and as a result, less successful.

We need to learn to look beyond what we first see. We need to ask ourselves if this seemingly negative situation actually presents us with a positive opportunity. For example, when the weather changes from sunny to rainy outside, rather than being disappointed that it is raining, we need to see this as something positive – as nutrition for plants and animals, for example. We also need to realize that this may present us with an opportunity to complete a task inside. This approach will allow us to see more of the opportunities in front of us.

When we condition our brain to be able to start to see the positives in life, we begin to experience more happiness, develop greater gratitude, and become more optimistic.

Studies have shown that people who have learned to be grateful are people who are also more energetic, emotionally intelligent, and forgiving. They are people who are less depressed, anxious, or lonely.²

Studies have also shown that people who are positive and optimistic set more challenging goals for themselves, perform better at work, stay committed when facing difficulty, and cope better when dealing with stressful situations.³ People who are optimistic actually experience more success than people who are pessimistic. This is because optimistic people approach their negative experiences with a determination to take them on as challenges and, if possible, to turn them into an opportunity.

To help them minimize their negatives and create more positives in life, some people enjoy the following activities:

Some people start each day writing a list of three good things that happened to them yesterday. This exercise causes the mind to think back over the past 24 hours and identify all the positive experiences they had from very small to very large. This may include something as simple as someone holding a door open for them or greeting them with a smile, or someone saying thank you after they assisted them. This is called The Three Good Things Exercise and research has found it helps people develop a positive attitude⁴.

Once you get in the habit of writing down three positive things each day and recognize the positive effects it has on you, then consider sharing it with others at home and work. You could go a step further and ask others in your family and work to spend a few minutes each day sharing with each other something positive each of you experienced in the preceding day. This will help create a positive home and work environment.

Researchers have also found that people who spend 20 minutes writing three times a week, about positive experiences in a personal journal experienced larger spikes of happiness than those who did not.⁵

Positive people tend to see the glass as half full. Being positive does not mean we stop seeing things which are wrong and need to be fixed. Most of us understand that we are imperfect people who live and work in an imperfect world. Therefore, we realize that we must pay attention to what we are seeing, both good and bad. We should also realize that we will be more effective at solving the challenges we face if we view them in a positive way as possible opportunities to learn, grow, and contribute to a better personal, family, and work life.

4.The Right Mindset

Researchers have found happier people choose to think of the world around them with hope, optimism, resilience, meaning, and gratitude. When they have negative experiences, they choose to find ways to rise above them¹. Happier people have developed a positive mindset. They learn to take a negative experience and view it in such a way that they learn something positive from it. In essence, they view negative experiences as new opportunities to learn and grow.

People with positive mindsets tend to approach their daily experiences with such positive expectations that they actually experience more success than people with negative expectations.²

People with a positive mindset approach each day with a desire to learn all they can from each experience. As a result, they are engaged, find greater meaning in their life and work, experience more pleasure, learn to do things better, and are more productive than negative people.³

More successful people simply believe that they can succeed. This enabled them to experience greater success than those who have self-doubt. People who have a specific and concrete focus on their strengths during a difficult task produce better results.⁴

People who work at improving their aptitudes, interests, and temperaments grow more than those with a fixed mindset.⁵

Regardless of what work they are performing (doctor, designer, or donut maker), some people view work simply as a job. They see work as a chore and a means to earning a living. People who see work as a career are more engaged in their work and tend to concentrate their energy on advancement and career success. Furthermore, those individuals who also see the work they do as a calling, see themselves as contributors to the greater good and find it gives them greater meaning and purpose in life.⁶

Successful people find meaning even in what some would describe as the most routine tasks. They do this by looking at how they can perform each task in a more efficient and effective manner, improve the quality of their work, be a better team member, and provide valued service that better meets the needs of their customer/client/patient/student.

Researchers have found that successful people have positive expectations of the people they work with and supervise. They believe that each of these individuals (e.g. coworker or student) will be successful in what they are learning and doing. Successful people further believe that the people they work with and/or supervise are intelligent and skilled. They believe these individuals want to be effective and find meaning and fulfillment in what they do. Finally, they continually try to convey these beliefs and expectations in their daily words and interactions with others.⁷

5. Changing Our Behaviour

Each of us is capable of changing our behaviour from bad to good, from good to great, from negative to positive, and from positive to passionate.

To change our behaviour we must first understand that most of our behaviours are learned behaviour or bundles of habits¹ that are developed as a result of repetitive actions or reactions that became so natural that they became automatic or occur without thinking. These include such automatic actions as brushing our teeth in the morning, going to the cupboard and getting out breakfast dishes, or cleaning up the dishes after a meal. When these are done without thinking, they are called habits.

Therefore, if we want to develop a new behaviour or habit, we must determine what the new behaviour will be and then consciously do it over and over again at the same time and in the same way until it becomes so ingrained in our behaviour and minds that soon we never have to think about it again.² It has become automatic. Scientists have learned that we can change our behaviour well into our senior years. The old adage that you can't teach an old dog new tricks is actually wrong.³

Once we have determined which new behaviour we want to adopt, it is wise to place something to do with it in a position or location that it is in our field of vision at the appropriate time. This helps it become a simple reminder and more easily accessible. For example, if you want to get in the habit of eating more nutritious food, place it in locations where it is more visible and easier to access. If you want to get out of the habit of eating less nutritious food, place it in locations where it is not visible and requires considerably more energy to reach. Researchers have found that these small actions can help us create new habits in our home or workplace and break old ones.

The more we plan ahead to organize our personal environment and work environment to make it easier to adopt new behaviours and harder to maintain undesirable behaviours, the sooner those behaviours will change. Once we begin practicing and repeating our new behaviours, the new habits will soon form.

6. Seek Help from Others and Offer Help to Them

A great amount of research has consistently found that the happiest and, clearly, the most successful people are those that seek help from others during difficult times and those who offer help to others when they are experiencing difficulty. Not only are these people happier, but they are also more productive, resilient, energetic, and engaged.¹

Those of us who build mutually supportive relationships with our family, friends, and coworkers are even more successful than those who do not. In fact, one researcher found that both men and women with few social relationships actually experience up to three times more depression than those with a strong network.² Another scientist found that women who had a breast cancer support group actually lived twice as long as those who did not.³

One study interviewed over a thousand highly successful professionals who were approaching retirement. When asked what had motivated them the most in their career, the majority stated friendship in the workplace.⁴ Another study found that the most successful workplace teams were those with the highest level of interaction and rapport.⁵ Still another study concluded that the more team members were encouraged to socialize and interact, the more engaged they felt, the more energy they had, and the longer they stayed on task. Social cohesion meant better results⁶.

A University of Michigan study found that “any point of contact with another person can potentially be a high-quality connection. One conversation, one email exchange, one moment of connecting in a meeting, can infuse both participants with a greater sense of vitality, giving them a bounce in their step and a greater capacity to act.”⁷

The more students in the classroom and employees in the workplace are encouraged to interact and collaborate inside and outside their formal gathering place, the more they tend to listen to each other, better understand each other’s views, feel better about one another, and work together more effectively.

The Gallup organization has spent years studying leading employment practices from around the world. A recent Gallup study found that U.S. companies lose close to 360 billion dollars each year due to low productivity. The findings indicate this is primarily caused by poor relationships between employees and employers.⁸

Another study conducted by Gallup included the following statement: “My supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about me as a person.” Organizations where the employees answered “yes” to this statement were found to be more productive, and employees remained working in them for a longer period of time. This reduced the cost of corporate training.⁹

7. Happiness Then Success

Researchers have found that people who focus on happiness each day are actually more successful in their life and their work.¹ Positive people are happier than negative people. As a result, positive people tend to be successful².

Positive people are happier people at school or work. They also tend to learn better, retain information longer, think more quickly and creatively, become skilled at completing analyses and problem solving, and invent better ways of doing things.³ They also make fewer mistakes and perform better.⁴

Examples of positive emotions include joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love. People who display positive emotions actually contribute to a more enjoyable and productive environment.⁵

People who think positively are able to manage their stress effectively and perform better in school, work, and home. This also helps those around them to feel relaxed, be happier, and become more successful. A positive person is open, caring, and respectful to everyone they come into contact with.⁶

Allowing yourself to feel negative or unhappy and speak to others this way will actually contribute to poor outcomes. This will also negatively affect those around you.⁷

Positive supervisors, managers, and leaders who focus on a happier workplace actually create work environments that are far more efficient, effective, and successful than neutral or negative supervisors.⁸

Notes:

1.0 Reacting to Bad Experiences

- 1 Anchor, Shawn (2010). *The Happiness Advantage*. Random House, at 108.
- 2 For a review, see: Linley, P.A., & Joseph, S. (2004). Positive change following trauma and adversity: A review. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 17(1), 11-21. Here is a sampling of studies that support the list given in this chapter: Bereavement (Davis, Nolen- Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998), Bone marrow transplantation (Fromm, Andrykowski, & Hunt, 1996), Breast cancer (Cordova, Cunningham, Carlson, and Andrykowski, 2001; Weiss, 2002), Chronic illness (Abraido-Lanza, Guier, & Colon, 1998), Heart attack (Affleck, Tennen, Croog, & Levine (1987), Military combat (Fontana & Rosenheck, 1998; Schnurr, Rosenberg, and Friedman, 1993), Natural disaster (McMillen, Smith, & Fisher, 1997), Physical assault (Snape, 1997), Refugee displacement following war (Powell, Rosner, Butollo, Tedeschi, & Calhoun, 2003).
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- 4 Anchor, Shawn (2010). *The Happiness Advantage*. Random House, at 111.
- 5 Anchor, Shawn (2010). *The Happiness Advantage*. Random House, at 124.
- 6 Anchor, Shawn (2010). *The Happiness Advantage*. Random House, at 122.
- 7 See for example: Peterson, C., & Barrett, L.C. (1987). Explanatory style and academic performance among university freshmen. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 603-607; Nolen-Hoeksema, S., Girgus, J., & Seligman, M.E.P. (1986). Learned helplessness in children: A longitudinal study of depression, achievement, and explanatory style. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 435-442. Seligman, M.E.P. & Schulman, P. (1986). Explanatory style as a predictor of productivity and quitting among life insurance sales agents. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 50, 832-838.

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- 3 Rodin, J., & Langer, E.J. (1977). Long-term effects of a control-relevant intervention with the institutionalized aged. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 35(12), 897- 902.
- 4 Anchor, Shawn (2010). *The Happiness Advantage*. Random House, at 136.

3.0 Seeing Beyond What Is in Front of Us

- 1 Anchor, Shawn (2010). *The Happiness Advantage*. Random House, at 91.
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4.0 The Right Mindset

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- 8 Bradberry, T. (January 30, 2009). A bad boss can send you to an early grave. *Philanthropy Journal*. Retrieved at 333.philanthropyjournal.org.
- 9 Authors Cohen and Prusak discuss how leaders can invest in the “space and time to connect” in their book *In Good Company*. See specifically pp. 81-101.

7.0 Happiness Then Success

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- 3 For an empirical study on these three distinct routes to happiness, see: Peterson, C., Park, N., & Seligman, M.E.P. (2005). Orientations to happiness and life satisfaction: The full life versus the empty life. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 6, 25-41.
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