

Life Lessons from The Famous and Wealthy



While writing my book *Take It from Me*, I interviewed more than 300 of America's most prominent and successful people and asked them to share their advice for career success.

Again and again, they returned to the classic principles that are so often ignored or overlooked in our busy times.

Here are the strategies that they use to do well at work—and in life...

KNOW WHERE YOU'RE GOING

With all that has been written about planning and goal setting over the years, you would think goal-setting skills would be second nature to us.

Yet an astonishing number of people still fail to give much thought to what they want out of life and how to get it.

Plans are dreams with deadlines. They include both a strong vision and steps for making that vision real.

Obviously, in today's rapidly changing environment, your plans need to be flexible. But there's a big difference between having a plan that can be adapted and passively letting other people and circumstances determine your goals.

A good way to focus is to write an imaginary article about yourself to celebrate your 100th birthday. What would you like to be celebrated?

Example: Although I enjoy and am proud of my career as a theatrical publicist, I realized some years ago that I didn't want to die with nothing but the words *He made TV game-show hostess Vanna White famous* written on my tombstone. I wanted to create something that would outlive me and make a difference in people's lives. So I decided to write a book, which gave me a deep sense of accomplishment and purpose.

Helpful: A way to determine your vision is to make a list of everyone you admire—famous or not—with a word or two

beside each name describing what you respect about that person. The ideas that come up over and over will reflect what you value most.

THROW YOURSELF INTO WHATEVER YOU DO

The people I interviewed didn't simply show up at their jobs every day. They worked with intensity—as if their lives depended on it. Successful people aren't satisfied with *good enough*. They prize excellence the way most of us value survival. Every one of them found some way of saying that passion is basic to success.

Actress Meryl Streep told me, *Take your heart to work, and ask the most and best of everybody else.*

Helpful: One way to inspire better performance in yourself is to associate with companies and people that reward excellence.

If you don't have passion, at least act as though you do until you find it. Your feelings will be inspired by your actions.

TAKE THE INITIATIVE

Comedian Steve Allen tells a story that he read as a youth, about a dozen boys who showed up to answer a help-wanted ad. A broom was partially blocking the hallway, and each boy who went in to be interviewed stepped over the broom on his way to the boss's office. Finally, one boy picked up the broom and moved it out of the way. He got the job.

Too many people don't take the initiative to do what's needed. Afraid of

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making mistakes, they keep doing things the way they've always been done. They wait for instructions or permission. Success doesn't come from making the fewest mistakes...it comes from getting results. You don't get results without action.

There are times when patience is called for. Moving too fast while negotiating can ruin a deal. But as a rule, successful people don't *wait*. They *do*.

USE YOUR IMAGINATION

Unsuccessful people think simplistically—as though there's only one right way and one wrong way to do things.

Successful people are more creative. They envision alternative scenarios. They invent multiple ways of asking a question and defining a problem. They come up with more than one solution.

Successful people are curious. They love to explore the questions, *What if...?* and *Why?* They reach breakthroughs by pursuing the questions that others never bothered to ask.

Example: Barbra Streisand is intensely curious about everything she does. Whether it is directing movies, acting or singing, she wants to understand every detail so that she can improve her craft.

Helpful: A good way to encourage multidimensional thinking is to make a *five-ways* list. Whatever your project, think of at least five ways to approach it.

Examples: *Five ways to launch a new product* or *five ways to improve customer service*. Don't censor yourself—and don't stop until you've come up with at least five ideas.

BE PERSISTENT—BUT POLITE

The people I interviewed had determination. When confronted with obstacles, they looked for ways around them. They did not give up.

Being doggedly determined doesn't mean suspending the rules of decorum and courtesy. Following up may get you the job, but making yourself annoying won't. Successful people are aware of how their actions affect others.

Politeness is not wimpy—it is good business. You would be amazed at how many people overlook the basics—*Would you mind if...*, *Is this a good time?* and especially, *Thank you*.

One of the most powerful tools for success is using your courage to ask for what you need...and coupling that with the sensitivity to treat others as you would like to be treated. ■