

How Some People Meet Life's Challenges Cope with Difficulties Survive Setbacks ...and Prosper



What's the secret of their success? Were these people gifted at birth with rare abilities that others can only envy?

Not at all. Successful people have the same inborn capacities that all humans possess—but they have simply *learned to use them better.*

They have developed the life skills built into our genetic blueprint and honed to perfection the tools that allow them to thrive at work...in relationships...in life. With these skills, they turn adversity to opportunity, obstacles to strengths.

During my decades of work as a psychologist, I've identified the key skills that make up the *success personality*—skills that you, too, can learn to build.

THE NEED TO HAVE THINGS WORK

Men and women who are the best at survival and success are skilled troubleshooters.

Successful people *want* and *need* things to work smoothly and well—for themselves and for others. They've developed a "feel" for the natural flow of things and a sense of how to work with the flow, not against it.

I call it the "synergistic personality"—this ability to know what's needed and the drive to supply it. It's both self-ish and unselfish...you make the world a better place for yourself by making it better for others.

While synergy seems instinctive, it can be nurtured and honed...

Look for creative solutions ...and ways to turn obstacles into opportunities.

Approach every new or difficult situation with a question: How

can I act so that things work out well for everyone?

Learn to tell the difference between *allowing* things to work well and *forcing* them to happen.

Perhaps the most subtle talent of synergistic people is the ability to sit back and let things run themselves when no help is needed. In this way, they save their energy for crises and obstacles, expend less effort and achieve great results.

THE DRIVE TO LEARN

In the "school of life," you learn valuable lessons *after* you take the tests. One skill that distinguishes successful survivors is their ability to learn from their experiences.

Success doesn't come from sitting back and waiting for others to tell you what to do. It is an intensely active quest for knowledge, new skills and new information. The most successful people enjoy trying out different approaches. Their playful curiosity drives them to get better, learn more and solve problems.

They're constantly getting smarter ...by asking questions, searching for answers, learning from their mistakes and the mistakes of others. *To build life-learning skills...*

If an unplanned event upsets you, express your feelings by writing in a journal or talking to a friend. Then reflect on the experience...replay it in your mind as an observer.

Ask yourself what you can learn from the event. Imagine how you would

Bottom Line/Personal interviewed Al Siebert, PhD, an ex-paratrooper who has taught management psychology for more than 25 years at Portland State University and through corporate consulting and workshops, Box 505, Portland, Oregon 97207. <http://www.thrivenet.com>.

He is author of five books, including *The Survivor Personality* (Berkley Publishing/\$12).



act more effectively the next time something similar occurs.

- Practice acting the way you want.

BECOMING MORE FLEXIBLE

It's often hard to describe successful people. They're serious and humorous...industrious and lazy...calm and emotional.

Instead of being locked into rigid patterns, they're flexible enough to respond to the shifting demands of every situation. Having a varied repertoire of responses is especially crucial in these times of rapidly changing conditions.

Example: Most companies value an optimistic outlook that puts a hopeful, positive spin on plans and problem solving. But truly valuable team members can become intensely pessimistic before taking action...to expose flaws, risks, possible weaknesses. They have the courage to speak up.

Becoming more flexible may not come easily. It demands acting in ways you've ridiculed or condemned in others...allowing yourself to get angry even if you were raised to stay calm and to be assertive even if it feels authoritarian.

Practice, patience and time are necessary to develop parts of yourself that you've long suppressed.

LEARNING EMPATHY

Successful people don't regard other people as obstacles to be steamrolled over. They have the ability to step out of themselves and into the shoes of others...to think the way other people think and feel as they feel. Because they see every situation from different angles, they learn more.

We all have the potential for empathy, and practice makes it stronger...

- In every situation, ask yourself, *What is this person thinking and feeling?*

Be curious enough to verify your impressions by inquiring directly: *I get the impression you're upset over this plan...am I right?* Each time you do this, you improve your ability to act synergistically.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

The two questions businesspeople most often ask me are *How can I work with negative people?* and *How can I handle angry people?* Unless you master these skills, you'll let others drain your energy and effectiveness.

If constant complainers and critics wear you down and irritate your nerves, look to your *own* attitude. You're

permitting this to happen by *your* negativity...toward them.

Helpful: Develop a more positive attitude toward negative people. Appreciate the contribution naysayers make (putting a brake on unrealistic optimism, for example)...but stay in control to neutralize the toxic effects of their negativity.

- Withhold attention from the constant complainer...just keep working.

Say, "*You may be right*"—and then change the subject. Or ask them to be quiet—tactfully (*Your complaining is troublesome to me...can we keep our discussions more constructive?*).

Be playful and beat them at their own game. After a string of complaints, say, "*Things are worse than you know,*" and suggest more to be upset about.

- Reward them when they're quiet or positive.

The best way to handle angry people is with curiosity and empathy. Instead of withdrawing or angrily defending yourself, act as you would with a good friend. Listen, try to feel the anger the other person is feeling, ask clarifying questions. Agree that the feeling is legitimate...and



then make constructive suggestions. ■