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The Mirage of Success and the 3 Stages of Feeling Fulfillment

The future is bright. But do you feel fulfilled? The side effect of success isn't always happiness.



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IMAGE: Getty Images

You're successful. You've read tons of books, read a ton of "best practice tips" articles online. You've scoured tradeshows and networking events. And all that time has finally paid off--your business is thriving, your clients are happy, and the future is bright.

But do you feel fulfilled?

The side effect of success isn't always happiness. Sometimes it's anxiety, existential apathy, or even a sense of isolation.

I worked with a corporate vice president in the banking industry, and, on paper, she had it all: the salary, stock options, and security. Yet she felt vaguely dissatisfied, even bored, wondering if something better was out there. This is a fairly common occurrence for successful entrepreneurs and leaders.

Here are the three stages of finding fulfillment--the next time you feel deflated or discontent, despite the green numbers on the spreadsheet, do the following:

Stage one: Mining for values. Mine your experience to find values; values are the cornerstone of fulfillment. Living in alignment with your values is crucial for harmony and fulfillment. Values include principles, standards, and qualities. They don't include material goods or people.

Revisit good memories, dream up ideal scenarios, or recreate the imagery you saw when you envisioned a you-and-improved future. Go back to a time that was "just right." Take notes, explore what it was about that time and those experience that make it a peak experience. Write all the elements, and reexamine the bigger picture.

Stage two: Defining your values. After you have your list of potential values, define them. Choose your top 5-10 values and describe what each one means--the significance they have for you, and how it looks and sounds in your life. Defining your values moves them from platitudes to personal priorities.

Write a sentence or two about each top priority means to you. Defining your values gives them specificity and clarity.

Stage three: Refining your values. After you've defined your values, refine them with a process of prioritization. It's revealing to understand which "top" values truly matter the most.

Imagine you are starting over in a brand-new work environment. Looking at your draft list of values, as yourself: If you could only be certain of having one value honored, which one would it be? Test it. If you had to live a life where you could count only on this one value, could you survive? Would you want to? And if you could have two values? Three? Continue ranking your values in this manner until you're satisfied you have them in priority order.

Ultimately, once you've completed these three stages you have collected the raw materials of a golden life. It's up to you to build a life with them. By looking at the role your values play in helping you achieve fulfillment, you are already beginning to live your values, as coaches say. In living your goals, you're connecting with yourself, truly allowing yourself to feel fulfilled, and opening yourself up for more success to come.

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