

From Fit to Stretch

Skills for Creating Success On Your Own Terms

Bruce Elkin

We long, as Abraham Maslow wrote, to be “that which we glimpse in our most perfect moments.” But, he also pointed out “we are generally afraid” to live up to the potential we see. As the years pass, the glimpses fade. Instead of filling us with hope, fantasies of success often trigger doubts and regret. In the success of others we recognize our own rejected desires. Though we may look successful, we wonder, can’t *I* have the life and work I long for?

Success on our own terms is about *creating*. But most of us only know how to react or respond to circumstances. Because our out-dated success principles don’t work in rapidly changing times, we don’t, yet, know how to bring into being the results we *truly* want. Success on our own terms requires new rules. And *you* might have to make them up yourself.

Traditional career planning helps you get a job. It’s a kind of personal strategic planning: assess resources, note weaknesses, then set “realistic” goals. But, throughout the world of work, “as strategy has blossomed,” says results guru, Gary Hamel, “competitiveness ... has withered.” Hamel, co-author of *Competing for the Future*,. says fitting goals to resources is a recipe for mediocrity. Peter Senge, best-selling author of *The Fifth Discipline*, agrees that lowering goals to show short-term success is disastrous. “The dynamics of eroding goals,” he says, “lies at the heart of the demise of many American manufacturing industries.”

“Set no small goals,” goes the old saw, “for they lack the power to stir one’s soul.” Successful goal-setters “stretch,” says Hamel. They create a “chasm” between ambition and resources. Creating stretch between vision and reality, he says, is “the single most important task” successful individuals and companies undertake. He cites examples like Honda, who, when still just a chain-saw manufacturer, set out to become the world’s top auto maker. Though the industry chuckled pitifully, Honda eventually invented the capacity to win the Manufacturers World Championship Formula One title four years running.

Hammel’s approach is remarkably similar to that of Robert Fritz, author of *The Path of Least Resistance* and *Corporate Tides*, whose “structural” approach Industry Week says “may be the next revolution” in success strategies. Senge, who says Fritz’s approach “forms the cornerstone in my work,” says that to be successful, organizations and individuals must develop “a capacity to *create* the future they most want.” That’s what Fritz focuses on.

“Creators,” he told executives at a recent workshop, “are sometimes conventional, but more often *inventional*.” They know what they want, what they have and how to bridge the gap between the two. How? Simple, he says, “*They make it up!*”

“To create *anything*,” he said, “begin with a vision, a picture of a result clear enough that you’d recognize it if you created it.” You don’t have to believe anything or have skills or resources on hand. Creating, he said, is about learning, experimenting and inventing what you need to produce what you want.

Though successful action is driven by vision, Fritz stresses you must root it in “current reality.” Be objective about where you are and what you have. “Making things better than they are, or worse, distorts reality. So describe it, don’t judge it!” Because we distort reality to prevent *emotional* tension, Fritz suggests replacing fear and anxiety with “structural tension.”

Holding vision and reality in mind simultaneously, he says, produces excitement, anticipation and a desire to act. Structural tension, he says is “the engine of creativity,” the source of success. “Tension,” he says, “is formed by the discrepancy between what you want and what you have.” As tension seeks resolution, it sets up a kind of magnetic pull that moves actions toward either vision *or* reality. The creator’s genius lies in the ability to orchestrate tension so actions consistently move toward desired results. “It’s not vision that has power, says Fritz, “it’s structure—the way you connect vision to reality.”

Not all structures move toward results. Some, like rocking chairs, oscillate back and forth. Others, like cars can go somewhere and stay there. Goal setting structures designed to act like cars generate better and longer lasting results than those that oscillate.

Conflicting desires like *change vs. continuity* set up oscillating structures. Pushing for change works for a while, but causes discontinuity, uncertainty. When pressure for continuity becomes dominant, it drives the action. Later, a renewed desire for change will resurface. The structure, and behavior, oscillates. Changing behavior without changing the underlying structure rarely produces lasting results.

Likewise, initiatives such as career planning, coaching, or therapy, undertaken without a supportive structure, are likely to oscillate. This explains the desperate search for the newest self-help or five-easy-steps-to-success program. The irony is most of these programs work, but only for a while because they are applied over top of unseen, oscillating structures.

Fritz’s approach provides a framework for changing both structure and behavior. The key, he says, is “separate what you want from what you believe possible or realistic.” Go for what matters *regardless* of what you have. Then, invent, build, innovate—*create*—what you need to make it happen. Count on resourcefulness rather than count resources and assume you don’t have what it takes. “So what if you don’t?” asks Fritz, “Get it!” The key to success on your own terms is *creating* whatever it takes to make vision a reality. *You make it up!*

Fritz and Hamel provide solid foundations for setting goals that truly matter. They provide the framework and leverage to turn limited resources into outstanding results. Your highest aspirations and deepest longing are the source of your power. They are the attractors that pull all aspects you and your life into the results-producing success you glimpse in your most perfect moments. To be successful on your own terms, take time to become intimate with what you see and feel in those moments. Clearly specify and articulate the results you *most* want. Clarify reality. Then bridge the gap between vision and reality with persistent, creative action.

When I suggest this idea to executives and professionals, they are initially skeptical. “It sounds too out there,” they say. But, once they grasp the power of changing behavior by changing structure and glimpse its awesome potential for producing results with limited resources, they say things like, “Well, the planning we do doesn’t produce the results we *most* want. Maybe this *can* help us become what we’ve always known we could be.”

(1090 words)
