

Bootstrapping

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As published in the August and September/October Issues of Learning Curves

So you are facing a challenge: a change in your life that is not going quite the way you expected. Perhaps you initiated the change, or maybe life dropped you into it with little warning. Regardless of how you came to be in this state of transition, you are now caught in its current, struggling to maintain a measure of control over your direction and destination.

You have taken the time to determine your objective, you've clearly defined your goal and you know where you want to go. Now you need to know what makes the difference between missing it and making it. What does it take to realize your plan, to make it real?

If you study the most successful people in all walks of life, you will discover some surprising facts. Some are well educated, others are not. They do not all score above average on intelligence tests. Many built success on a shoestring, while others were well financed. And they come from a wide variety of backgrounds. In fact, successful people have surprisingly little in common. However, certain recurring themes do appear in the biographies of those who have taken a dream and turned it into reality. These themes, in their simplest form, can be stated in one old-fashioned, colloquial phrase "pull yourself up by your bootstraps". People who succeed (often against the odds) pull themselves up by their bootstraps. What exactly does this mean and how can you learn to "bootstrap" your way to your goals?

Examined in the context of achievement, this phrase alludes to certain personal characteristics and habits that appear again and again in the life stories of those who accomplish great things. These traits are also common among people who pursue and regularly achieve many smaller goals. In some cases these behaviours come naturally, in other circumstances they require determined cultivation. In every successful circumstance (barring perhaps a lottery win), you will find evidence of these qualities. So let's take a closer look at these amazing success ingredients.

Successful people believe in themselves and in their dream. No matter what the world tells them, they have an abiding passion for the "rightness" of the goal toward which they strive. The idea that what we believe about ourselves and the world around us has power is not new. It is the basic premise of hundreds of books on positive thinking. It is addressed in the bible and is expressed as follows in the teachings of Gautama Buddha: "We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts, we make our world."

Because belief is so critical to success, achievers carefully nurture it. If they are surrounded by family or friends who tear them down or ridicule their vision, they seek out an environment that is supportive and positive to help sustain them. Although these role

models know there is no substitute for good research and a well thought out business plan, they reveal by their actions that belief in oneself and one's goal will carry the day in the end.

Successful people are opportunistic. Even as they focus their energy on the task at hand, they never lose sight of the possibilities: keeping eyes and ears open to opportunity. Often, an appropriate side-step in the short term moves us closer to the long term goal.

Many years ago a business man named Andrew Bradford held the contract for all public printing for the state of Pennsylvania despite his reputation for shoddy work. One day Bradford was asked to print an important speech for the governor. He put the document together in his usual careless fashion, knowing that he would not be questioned.

Another young printer, who was focused on building his own print shop, saw Bradford's sloppy product. Although he did not have the contract, nor did he have the connections to take this high profile business away from Bradford, he saw this as an opportunity. The young printer decided to seize the moment. He produced an elegant, high quality version of the speech, which he delivered with his compliments to the governor and the members of the assembly.

As history confirms, the opportunistic young Benjamin Franklin was soon awarded the contract for all of Pennsylvania's public printing. Benjamin Franklin understood that this slight detour from his plan had minimal downside risk with significant upside potential. Winning this contract was not part of his immediate business plan since his competitor was well entrenched. Yet, when an opportunity came along to demonstrate the superior quality of his product, Benjamin Franklin jumped at it.

Another recurring characteristic of those who realize their dreams is that they are organized around their objective. This does not necessarily mean that they have an effective filing system or a neat desk. It means that everything they do, everything they spend money on and every course they take is assessed against their ultimate goal. Before committing time or resources to any activity, they ask the following question: "will this move me toward my objective or away from it?" Having answered the question, they avoid decisions that send them off target ensuring that their choices remain organized around achieving the goal. Because of this, they waste very little energy on non productive pursuits, and maintain their focus even in the midst of chaos.

People who achieve great things hold on. They are tenacious in their commitment to a goal. Like a bull dog, bred with the tenacity to hold a wild boar and the steadfastness to protect home and family, successful people are not easily shaken loose from their objective. As long as the plan is sound and their belief in the dream remains strong, they are resolute in their pursuit.

Another characteristic common among the highly accomplished is an extraordinary energy level. They often display internally generated enthusiasm that is truly spirited. According to the Houghton Mifflin Canadian Dictionary, spirited is defined as "full of or characterized by animation, vigour or courage." Typically, those who succeed are passionate and animated when sharing their plan. They are vigorous in their efforts to turn their plan into reality, and they have the courage to continue even in the face of opposition, adverse circumstance, and risk.

Granted, sometimes we don't wake up feeling very spirited, especially when things have not been going our way. For many of us, if we don't feel spirited, we don't know how to be spirited. William James, Harvard psychologist, suggested that our understanding of the relationship between feeling and behaviour may be reversed. In other words, if you wish to feel enthusiastic, be enthusiastic; if you wish to feel happy, smile; and if you wish to feel confident, stand up straight and lift your eyes from the ground. Successful people understand how important it is to project their belief in themselves and their dream with passion, no matter how they may feel. They behave in the way they want to feel until they feel they way they behave. This is the true nature of being spirited and possessing the kind of internal motivation that leads to success.

In order to continue in the face of opposition, setbacks and possible ridicule, people who make it through are thick-skinned. When someone rejects their idea, they don't take it personally. They understand that detractors have a different agenda and a different set of priorities that must take precedence in their lives. The "unconvinced" may even be focused on their own dream and unwilling to be distracted by yours.

In the final analysis, the difference between making it and missing it is often the difference of "just one more": one more try, one more call, one more inch. When being approached by a salesperson (on average) people will say "no" five times before they say "yes". Unfortunately, most sales people give up after hearing "no" twice. If you look, you will find hundreds of examples of people who did not let rejection of their ideas or ridicule of their dreams stop them; people who were thick-skinned enough to win instead of wallow. One such example was a boy who dreamed of drawing comic strips. When he tried to pursue his goal as a young man no one wanted his drawings. In fact, one editor in Kansas City told him to give up drawing altogether. In spite of multiple rejections and many setbacks, Walt Disney kept trying. Most of us are glad he did.

As the Chinese Proverb says, "fall down six, get up seven." Anyone who has ever reached a challenging goal understands how important it is to say "next" and move on. Of course, we don't hear the stories of the many more who give up in the face of criticism and adversity. We, and they, will never know how close they may have been to their goal.

In addition to the six characteristics we've talked about so far, there are three processes that high achievers use on a regular basis. Let's look at each of these individually, keeping in mind that to be effective they are used in combination.

It is clear that the goal is the destination, a touchstone that pulls successful people forward. The plan is the detailed map they follow in the pursuit of their vision. Along the way, while the destination remains constant, achievers regularly review their route. When they review, they may find that new information suggests a possible improvement to their roadmap. Maybe they determine that results are not what they expected based on previous experience or research. Sometimes they find an avenue is blocked by external forces and is no longer available. This process of regularly reviewing the plan, the activities and the results is one more distinguishing factor among those who consistently attain their objectives.

Of course, after they conduct these regular reviews, successful people alter their course as required. If new information uncovers a more direct route, they revise the plan and proceed. If the review indicates that what seemed to be a valid shortcut is heading up a blind alley, the necessary changes are made and the roadmap is brought up to date. Everything is approached as an experiment. The plan documents the best course of action based on the information available at the time it is made. When new information makes a piece of the plan obsolete or less effective, that piece is altered. The plan is not static and it is not cast in stone.

Finally, successful people plan again; when regular reviews uncover the need for many adjustments, when the environment they operate in changes in ways that will impact their progress, when they add a new goal to their list, and most importantly, when a goal is achieved and they are embarking on a new challenge.

To accomplish your goal and realize your dream, emulate the people who have "pulled themselves up by their bootstraps". Embody the characteristics and behaviours of those who consistently achieve. Learn, imitate and cultivate what does not come naturally, and practice what does. Above all, remember, what it takes to pull yourself up and reach your objective is a good strong BOOTSTRAP.

Believe - in yourself and your dream

Opportunistic - keep your eyes and ears open for opportunity

Organized - stay organized around your goal

Tenacious - hold on no matter what

Spirited - speak of your vision with passion and courage

Thick-skinned - know that rejection of your ideas is not personal

Review - regularly look back at how your plan is working

Alter - change your plan if necessary

Plan again - and plan, plan, plan