

Success Avoidance The Hidden Saboteur

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People who refuse a promotion, hesitate to accept more responsibility, quit just short of their goals, refuse to accept a compliment, resist change, or fail to meet performance goals may all have something in common. They may fear success and be engaging in "success avoidance" or "success sabotage," sometimes called the "fear of success."

Based in part on their level of self-esteem and self-knowledge, individuals define for themselves a comfortable identity which expresses to the rest of the world who they think they are.

This identity becomes their self-image. It's an image they act out every day in a performance they give to their families, friends, peers, and professional colleagues -- and to themselves. Though it might not be their ideal image, it's a safe one they wear comfortably and without doubt.

Organizations also have specific identities. Sometimes referred to as institutional or corporate cultures, an organization's identity projects a certain image to employees and to the public at large. Individual and organizational identities and self-images can become relatively fixed and difficult to change.

Success is Demanding

In our society, being successful means continually striving for greater achievements and rewards. It means constantly reaching new plateaus and dealing with new stages. It may mean new challenges, new expectations, new bosses, and new environments. It might result in more pay, higher status, bigger contracts, and more employees. It could mean new neighborhoods, new offices, and new friends.

In short, being successful means leaving a predictable way of life and vaulting into a realm of unknown and unanticipated changes. This can be risky, not only because

people are usually afraid of the unknown, but also because this kind of change affects everyone with whom the individual comes in contact. To complicate the issue even further, society in general does not like us to maintain the status quo or ignore the quest for success.

With all this pressure, it's no wonder we sometimes sabotage opportunities for advancement and success.

Recognizing Success Trade-offs

Let's look at some of the possible trade-offs that may result from success:

Having to maintain a higher level of achievement. This may be a personal expectation or one shared by others. The fear of "going backwards" in the future has a tendency to stop us from "moving forward" in the present.

Not having the freedom to make mistakes.

Increased opportunities for competition and stress.

Being viewed as better than average or becoming more visible which may cause envy and create distance between colleagues and friends.

Having increased power (which I'm defining as the "ability to influence") that feels unfamiliar and undeserved.

Leaving people behind - saying goodbye to individuals that we like or love, admire and respect, or with whom we have shared an office, neighborhood, or lifestyle.

The Imposter Syndrome

Among the more intriguing concepts associated with Success Avoidance is the Imposter Syndrome, which manifests itself through questions directed at the self, such as: "Who am I to do this?" "What makes me think I can handle this job?" "I can't believe they hired me!" "They think I'm more skilled than I am." "I'm going to be found out!" I've seen the imposter syndrome exhibited by people in almost all professions and at every level, including those people who project images of high self-esteem.

Understanding Success-Avoidance

Avoiding success may be less about the fear of failure than it is about changing a familiar identity, a comfortable self-image, and a safe environment.

Success need not be feared, and success-avoidance should not be negatively

judged. Merely understanding the phenomenon can serve to increase self-esteem and make it easier to take risks, or it can provide the opportunity to work on the difficult issues surrounding change.

Respect for our own as well as other people's pace for accommodating change lowers anxiety, reduces pressure, and opens up new avenues for dialogue that are helpful rather than directive.

