THE SUCCESS TRIBUNAL / FIELD GUIDE

The Psychology of Success

A field guide to achievement, autonomy, money, wellbeing, recognition and the danger of single-number verdicts.

A court that refuses a simple verdict

Success is not a single scientifically validated score. This field guide offers conceptual tools and reflective exercises. It cannot infer someone's private health, finances, relationships, or overall worth from publicly visible projects.

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01 The definitions problem

When we ask whether a person is successful, we smuggle a definition into the question. An employer might count reliable performance, a family might count care and stability, a researcher might count sound findings, and the person might count autonomy or a peaceful Tuesday. Different answers may be internally coherent because the criteria differ.

Think of at least four dimensions: instrumental resources (money, time, safety), accomplishments (skills and completed goals), subjective experience (satisfaction, freedom, meaning) and relationships or contribution (how others are affected). They overlap but cannot be reduced without a value judgment. A single scalar score hides this choice.

A rigorous account starts by asking who selects the criteria, what evidence counts, whose interests are represented, and which aspects remain unobservable. A public portfolio can show work. It cannot settle whether the person feels content or whether the work improves other lives.

Reflect & apply

Question: List two things you would want even if nobody knew about them.

Question: Identify one external achievement criterion that you genuinely endorse.

02 Wellbeing as a family of constructs

Carol Ryff proposed multiple dimensions of psychological wellbeing: self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. This was partly a response to the idea that wellbeing should be captured entirely by positive emotion or satisfaction. Her model is a research framework rather than a universal judgment of worth.

Daily affect and reflective life evaluation are also different. Someone might report a stressful week and still judge their life meaningful; someone might enjoy a pleasant day without endorsing the direction of their life. These are not contradictions. They answer different questions about experience.

Measurement requires care. Questionnaire answers depend on language, memory, situations and cultural frames. A person may change their evaluation when asked to compare different domains. For this reason, the success tribunal intentionally refuses to convert sparse public information into a wellbeing verdict.

Reflect & apply

Question: How would your recent week look if described through feelings? Through purpose? Through relationships?

03 Motivation, autonomy, competence and relatedness

Self-determination theory emphasises the psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy is the sense of acting with volition, not necessarily working alone; competence concerns effective engagement; relatedness concerns connection with others. Supportive contexts can help people integrate goals rather than merely comply with pressure.

A person may pursue money and prestige for sensible reasons. Such goals are not automatically inauthentic. A fuller question asks how the goal is chosen, what it enables, and what its pursuit costs. Financial security often creates the conditions for greater autonomy, while demanding obligations may also limit it.

An educational website may demonstrate practice and learning activity. It does not alone show that the creator has mastered the topic, helped a visitor, or built a viable business. Reflection and outcome evidence must remain separate.

Reflect & apply

Question: Which goal currently feels freely endorsed, and which feels mainly imposed?

Question: What relationship or support system makes your learning possible?

04 Money without magical thresholds

The 2010 study by Kahneman and Deaton used a large US survey to distinguish life evaluation from emotional wellbeing and reported different patterns by income. Discussion later became overly simplified into a universal salary threshold above which money does not matter. That is not a safe general rule.

Killingsworth, Kahneman and Mellers in 2023 revisited conflicting evidence through an adversarial collaboration. They found a more nuanced pattern, including heterogeneity in reported emotional experience. These debates show why measurement, population, distribution and analytic method are crucial.

Money can improve security, housing, health access, freedom and opportunities. It cannot guarantee trust, meaning or good judgment. Conversely, romantic claims that money never matters can minimise the lived consequences of financial insecurity. The careful position makes room for both material and nonmaterial dimensions.

Reflect & apply

Question: What financial condition would make your everyday life materially safer?

Question: What would remain important after that condition was met?

05 Comparison and recognition

Festinger’s social comparison theory addresses why people evaluate themselves through other people, especially where direct standards are uncertain. A reference group changes the visible benchmark. The same work can appear advanced when compared with one’s early attempts, ordinary among peers, and rudimentary beside an established expert.

Comparison has uses. Looking at an expert can expose a skill gap; looking at close peers can clarify feasible next steps. It can also become unhelpful when a person swaps reference groups after every accomplishment. That is an evaluation problem rather than evidence that all comparison is unhealthy.

Recognition deserves similarly careful treatment. Fame may distribute valuable work and attract opportunities. It is not equivalent to contribution, and lack of fame does not imply failure. Quality, usefulness, audience, commercial performance and personal fulfilment must be examined separately.

Reflect & apply

Question: Whose standard currently informs your work in a useful way?

Question: Which comparison makes the finish line move without providing new information?

06 Biases in interpreting success

Survivorship bias occurs when stories focus on the cases that remain visible and omit those that disappeared. Outcome bias occurs when we praise a decision mainly because it ended well rather than examining information and risks present when it was taken. Cumulative advantage can magnify early recognition and resources.

These concepts do not prove that a particular successful person was merely lucky, nor that a visible project lacks value. They remind us to demand a comparison sample, a timeline, and direct evidence before making causal judgments. Ask about the unsuccessful attempts and the collaborators who rarely appear in the final account.

Reflect & apply

Question: When you admire an outcome, what alternative outcomes or invisible work have you not seen?

07 A practical plural scorecard

Begin with nine categories: financial security, education, professional growth, creative output, relationships, autonomy, learning, contribution and physical or psychological wellbeing. Assign each a personally chosen importance from zero to five. Separately mark the evidence status as observed, self-reported, interpreted or unknown.

Do not turn unknown information into a zero. An unknown is missing data, not proof of a low score. Similarly, do not let strong creative output stand in for private wellbeing. A weighted average may describe your assumptions, but its numbers are decisions about values rather than measurements discovered by science.

Reflect & apply

Question: Which one of your priorities is most under-represented in conventional scorecards?

The courtroom conclusion

The life is still happening

Successful under what definition, evidenced by what information, at what point in a changing life? The stronger question invites inquiry rather than a permanent sentence.

Research references and further reading

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These references contextualise educational claims. They do not measure the success, health, income, or private relationships of Sahil Tayal. This guide is an original synthesis, not a systematic review.