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The Superstar Paradox—How Overachievers Miss the Mark in Life and at Work

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Extraordinary success can make you rich and powerful. It can also leave you incurious, blinkered, invulnerable, deeply unhappy and ironically—mediocre. In my work, as an executive coach crisis-counselor, I have found that the ruthless pursuit of over-achievement towards success, power, and money is playing a major role in the erosion of people's happiness. That premise is supported by clear evidence of unhappiness and dissatisfaction seen across the board in western culture, limiting the phenomenon not only to those who are extremely successful, but to anyone buying into "hustle culture[1]" and developing extreme anxiety by scrolling through the lives of others on Instagram. In a society that still values over-achievement in the form of hard work above all[2], this paper aims at a central tenet of western societies that over-achieving paves the road to success and riches, which lead to happiness. This talk will illustrate through proprietary and up to date global research show the opposite that over-achieving tendencies in any department of life can limit happiness profoundly.

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A few years ago, a friend confessed to me that he was reluctant to attend his Harvard Business School reunion because an old chum told him: "If you don't make at least $2 million a year, you shouldn't even bother".

By all objective standards, this man is an over-achiever who should be proud of his accomplishments regardless of whether he had hit some arbitrary financial milestone in the mind of a colleague. When my friend told me that he was actually considering not going to his reunion, I paused to think of all my clients who have expressed similar concerns in earnest and wondered: Why does it seem for so many of us that the more we have, the further we go, and the better we look on social media from the outside, the less happy and secure we really feel on the inside?

To answer that question, I turned inward, and thought of my old self. While I've always done well, comparatively speaking—meaning that I have met all or most of my social group's expectations—I was suffering not too long ago from that palpable sensation that my life lagged in comparison with the friends whom I saw living it up on yachts all over Instagram. In fact, there's an urban dictionary term for this often-empty attempt to make our lives feel more grandiose on social media called "flexing on the (Insta)gram". Back then, I was caught in a relentless attempt to justify my self-worth by comparing my life and

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[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/01/opinion/burnout-hustle-culture-gentrification-work.html.

[2] https://www.wsj.com/articles/americans-have-shifted-dramatically-on-what-values-matter-most-11566738001.

accomplishments to others. And it messed everything up. My mission as a coach is to help Machiavellians who "have it all" to align their life achievements with a healthy dose of compassion and self-acceptance so that they can be happy and stop harming themselves and those around them. In the process, they find that they actually become far more successful, too.

If you're wondering if you're trapped in trade-off mode, let me ask you a few simple questions:

- Do you believe that you don't yet have everything you want?
- Does the success of others make you jealous, annoyed, or resentful?
- Are you unhappy?

In a survey that I conducted with more than 1,000 people earning more than $200,000 with high degrees of education, over 53% percent answered "yes" to all the above. Data on the nation's professional psyche backs my survey up: Even in our current bright economy, a surprising portion of professional Americans report feeling unhappy[3]. In the mid-1980s, roughly 61 percent of workers told pollsters they were satisfied with their jobs. Since then, that number has declined substantially, hovering around half. The low point was in 2010, when only 43 percent of workers were satisfied, according to data collected by the Conference Board, a nonprofit research organization[4]. The rest said they were unhappy, or at best neutral, about how they spent the bulk of their days. Even among professionals like those in medicine and law, other studies have noted a rise in discontent. This is what I call the Superstar Paradox[5]. It's the paradoxical condition of "having it all", yet being objectively discontent.

Years of work with overachievers has compelled me to try to explain why this happens, or why so many outwardly successful CEO and C-suite leaders just aren't happy. It boils down to one truth: They haven't focused on happiness. Given that many contemporary overachievers have been growing businesses, building wealth, winning awards, marrying trophy partners and socializing with A-list celebrities while not taking a personal assessment of how content they are as they are conquering the next task, it's not surprising that happiness would have eluded them. After all, well-being comes primarily from following our passion and from loving ourselves—and these are not things they teach in business school, nor something overtly evident on Instagram. Somewhere along the way, overachievers confused the trappings of success with happiness, and they got lulled into making false tradeoffs—tradeoffs such as marrying for comfort rather than joy or working primarily for the highest pay grade rather than the sheer enjoyment of a job well done. The perceived positive trade-off often results in dead-end issues of depression, isolation, and overall unhappiness.

We see the paradox all the time among executives who have all the trappings of external success—but behind the veneer of success often are burned out souls who suffer from "pathologies" such as narcissism, fear, anger, and depression, according to William & Mary Law School research by Jayne Barnard[6]. These pathologies can have devastating effects not only on the health and psyche of the individual, but also on organizations and subordinate employees. Though overachievers often are highly compensated, money isn't enough to offset the pressures of the corporate shark-eat-shark environment. The resulting pressure leads "externally perfect" executives caught in the Superstar Paradox to explode in short-tempered anger directed at subordinates and fear that stymies forward-thinking decision-making. These overachievers often experience

[3] https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/02/21/magazine/elite-professionals-jobs-happiness.html.
[4] https://www.conference-board.org/blog/postdetail.cfm?post=6391.
[5] https://www.cnbc.com/2019/09/15/4-ways-overachievers-are-sabotaging-their-career-how-they-can-stop.html.
[6] https://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2089&context=lsfp.

sleepless nights from work stress and often feel isolated at home and at work believing that they have no one in which to truly confide—and depression sets in. When high-profile figures, such as iconic fashion designer Kate Spade, TV celebrity Anthony Bourdain, or comedian Robin Williams commit suicide, we watch in stunned amazement, wondering how those who have built both notoriety and fortune could possibly have been so unhappy.

Not surprising, research suggests that CEOs may be depressed at more than double the rate of the general public, with about seven percent of American adults reporting having at least one major depressive episode, according to 2014 National Institute of Health data[7]. Further, prominent psychiatrist Michael Freedman found that nearly half (49 percent) of the entrepreneurs in his study said they experienced mental health issues at some point in their lives[8]. If overachieving entrepreneurs are suffering in silence from the Superstar Paradox, then what behaviors are they modeling for younger generations? Unfortunately, the American Psychological Association in a 2018 study reported that recent generations of college students have reported higher levels of perfectionism than earlier generations, signaling even more troublesome times for upcoming entrepreneurial overachievers[9].

So why is this happening? The answer I have found through working with over-achieving individuals and through research comes down to a plethora of effects, including:

- Believing success only comes as it relates to power, money, or status;
- Creating self-imposed benchmarks based on early perceptions of goals and success;
- Fearing mistakes or being perceived as a failure;
- Depending heavily on the opinions of others;
- Seeking status through people pleasing and trying to be all things to all people;
- Fostering mental arrogance/cognitive entrenchment—the sense that I have all the answers and my way is right;
- Lacking vulnerability, and embracing pretense and face-saving tactics;
- Lacking empathy.

These findings are based on my years of work and research on C-suite executives and entrepreneurs at the top of their fields. Unfortunately, even as overachievers come to terms with the unhappiness that permeates their lives as they attempt to paint a picture of having it all together, many are incapable of leaving the trappings of success behind, even when it might mean a more peaceful future. Historian and author Yuval Noah Harari puts it this way: “How many young college graduates have taken demanding jobs in high-powered firms, vowing that they will work hard to earn money that will enable them to retire and pursue their real interests when they are 35? But by the time they reach that age, they have large mortgages, children to school, houses in the suburbs that necessitate at least two cars per family, and a sense that life is not worth living without really good wine and expensive holidays abroad. What are they supposed to do, go back to dig up roots? No, they double their efforts and keep slaving away”.

In my work, I’ve found three practical lessons for all who are ready to swap the challenging and never-ending quest for survival of the fittest for a life of fulfillment and harmony. These are:

1. Shift your focus from trying to achieve more success to trying to achieve more happiness. If you think

[7] https://www.forbes.com/sites/alicegwalton/2015/01/26/why-the-super-successful-get-depressed/#48ce42ce3850.
[8] https://www.inc.com/emily-canal/mental-health-for-entrepreneurs.html.
[9] https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2018/01/perfectionism-young-people.

about what is stressing you in the first place, it is the force with which you live—the effort you are applying to try (so hard) to achieve success. Use the skills you already have in goal setting and set goals for doing the things consistently that will truly make you happy. Forget those vacation destinations that will simply make you look "cooler" on Instagram and seek out those places and activities that truly make your heart sing. Aim straight at harmony, upliftment, and happiness. Leveraging your extraordinary ability to focus your energies on doing what brings you automatic joy and working backwards from there, you will immediately feel calmer, more fulfilled, and happier. Practically speaking, this means that when faced with the next step you are about to take for your success ask—*does this bring me joy?*

2. Instead of asking *"what am I getting out of this?"*, ask *"how may I serve here?"*. When I started to come out of my own self-imposed anxious existence, at first I was a bit too shaky to really develop compassion for myself or to slow down, so I did something easier—I turned my focus to helping other people by joining Crisis Text Line[10] as a volunteer suicide counselor. It worked. Something powerful happens when you serve others. You stop thinking about yourself so much. Moreover, it feels good to do good, and it allows you to chill out about that other stuff you were working so hard to control because you gain some much-needed perspective. Perhaps you are not called to help people in crisis—that's cool. But I am calling on you now to bring peace to the vanguard of your life and into your soul. Have an internal revolution. The way to get to this is to stop asking in any situation—"how do I fit in", and ask instead—"how may I serve?"
3. Stop beating yourself up. A few months ago, I was invited to a dinner party in the home of a well-known and very wealthy fashion designer. As I enjoyed a tour of her apartment, I marveled at the beauty around me—the product of her meticulous eye for style. But when we sat down to eat, I found that my hostess was beside herself. Apparently, the table had been set with the "wrong" plates—plates she did not believe suited the occasion. All around the hostess commented that the dishes which were on the table were lovely, but she was having none of it. Here are some of the things she said about the terrible mistake when she realized what had happened:

- I can't believe this happened.
- That was so stupid. I can't believe I didn't check the table in advance.
- I really hope you will all forgive me.

For the average person, this story might seem comical. To a suicide counselor and coach, it is rather alarming and alarmingly common. A lot of people speak this way to themselves, even on matters that seem rather trivial. From missing a deadline to eating an extra calorie, perfectionists constantly give themselves a hard time over the most mundane things. No matter how chic the term is in certain circles, perfectionism *never* serves you. To paraphrase author Elizabeth Gilbert, perfectionism is just a way of showing how insecure you are. If you, like so many of my clients, have experienced panic attacks or anxiety attacks, suffer from OCD tendencies, are hyper-critical of or gossip about others, or are currently challenged with an eating or control disorder (such as self-harm), perfectionism might be at the root of all of those issues. You would do well to learn how to speak kindly to yourself in your quest for relief. For example, in the case of dinner party "Plate gate", say instead:

[10] www.crisistextline.org.

- I didn't know.
- It's OK.
- I did my best.
- I can start over tomorrow.

It is possible to get out of the Superstar Paradox. The hardest part is admitting there's a problem. The key to our resurrection, therefore, lies in staying focused on not being perfect, but human.

My findings and practice show that the Superstar Paradox is a real problem, but if the over-achiever is ready to be open to change, accept vulnerability and imperfection as paths to freedom, and can commit to doing the work, they will find happiness, satisfaction, and joy. as did that friend, that ended up choosing to attend his Harvard Business School reunion once he realized that not only did he have nothing of which to be ashamed, but that showing up exactly as and where he was felt empowering and authentic. He showed up with no pretenses, mingled with no mask, and reported back that the vast majority of his old classmates were thrilled to just see him again, just as he was.

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