

# **The Success Trap**

# **What's in it for me? Learn how to break free from the success trap.**

Good job, good salary, recognition from your peers. Sounds great, right? Well, sure. But none of these things – nothing that we conventionally call “success” – is necessarily going to make you happy. In fact, achieving this sort of success can even do you harm. You might start to forget what you want out of life, what your true priorities are, or – to be blunt – what “success” means to you. Because success, in its conventional form, is a trap. And it's time to break out. The author, Dr. Amina Aitsi-Selmi, did just that. She shifted her career away from health policy and toward coaching work. As you'll see in these blinks, there's no reason you can't also find a new path. In these blinks, you'll learn

how success myths trap us in the wrong career; how to overcome goal addiction; and what to do when you've made it out of the trap.

## **In the complex modern world of work, it's all too common to fall into the success trap.**

In the twenty-first century, the workplace is unlike it's ever been before. Wages are stagnant, while the cost of living soars. Artificial intelligence is threatening to take jobs away. And worldwide happiness levels are in the gutter. A 2017 survey found that, out of 40 activities, people ranked paid work as being the second worst thing for their well-being. The only thing worse? Being ill in bed. Today's chaotic world is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. It even has an acronym: VUCA. And it also applies to our careers. It's no wonder that when people feel they're on to a good thing, they tend to stay put. The thing is, staying put can also lead to problems. The key message here is: In the complex modern world of work, it's all too common to fall into the success trap. It might sound strange to think of success as a trap. But what looks like success often hides deeper problems. Say you find a stable, well-paying job. You then quickly adapt to a lifestyle that matches your means – you buy or rent expensive property, go on exotic holidays, and so on. But that creates a dependency on your job, and that means you stop evaluating whether it's making you happy. It's not always about money though. Take Xena, a successful doctor working in policy and research. Outwardly, she seemed driven, able, and set for success. But inwardly, she was struggling with a regimented workplace culture and doubting whether she was truly making a difference. She felt stuck climbing a traditional career ladder. Xena was trapped by the success myth – the idea that achieving promotion after promotion is all a career should be. Other people become trapped by work myths, like the idea you must keep busy all the time or maximize your productivity. And financial incentives can trap you too, either through the high salary itself, or the golden handcuffs promise of a future pay rise. So what do you do when you feel trapped? Xena eventually took the plunge and started out on her own, finding a related line of work that was a better match for her. These blinks will help you do the same, but first, you should consider this important question: Why do high achievers, in particular, have to grapple with these problems?

# **High achievers might seem to have it easy but success brings its own problems.**

Diana was a classic high achiever. She was following in her father's footsteps as a hospital consultant and her career had started fantastically well. It wasn't long before she was headhunted by a top hospital and given a leadership position. Recognition and awards were pouring in, and she found the time for a few half-marathons along the way. But something didn't feel right. Was she really doing the right thing with her life? It felt like she was at the top of a mountain – but what came next? Another mountain? Success was great – but it hadn't brought fulfillment. The key message here is: High achievers might seem to have it easy but success brings its own problems. Of course, it's not only high achievers who experience career crises. Plus, being a high achiever isn't a problem in itself. But the strange thing is, for those who achieve the most, a career crisis can feel particularly acute. For many successful people, achievement is a compulsion. They achieve one goal, and then immediately move on to the next – there's no stepping back and feeling proud. And there often isn't time for concerns like health and relationships, either. What's worse, is that when successful people start to feel unfulfilled, they often feel guilty about it. Doctors do this especially. Because their job has a high status and is seen to be doing good, questioning their own happiness can feel ungrateful. Another issue that successful people often face is imposter syndrome, which is the very common feeling that you aren't competent at your own job – it's something everyone from Michelle Obama to Meryl Streep has struggled with. Finally, successful people may also find they become what the author calls, rescuers: those people who help others to such an extent that they feel they don't deserve help themselves. All of these problems add up to the high achiever paradox: people like Diana, who seem to have won the race to a successful career, who then lose their happiness in the process. Not to mention that high achievers are also at great risk of burnout. How can you resolve this paradox, see the success trap for what it really is, and break free? First and foremost it requires a change of attitude.

## **Escaping the success trap requires a mindset shift.**

It's good to have goals. Having a clear vision is a key step to achieving success. The problem is, successful people sometimes focus on goals to a frankly concerning degree. And when you're used to constantly having a target to meet or a commitment to keep, the whole process can turn into goal addiction. Goal addiction is like any other addiction – like cigarettes or chocolate. Goal addicts do whatever it takes to get their hit, even at the expense of their happiness or family life. How can you quit goal addiction? Only by changing your way of thinking. The key message here is: Escaping the success trap requires a mindset shift. The opposite state of mind to goal addiction is creative flow, otherwise called being “in the zone.” In flow, you become absorbed in an activity for its own sake. You're able to find creative solutions to the problems you face, and, crucially, to enjoy the process. Finding a creative solution doesn't mean constantly writing poems, by the way! Creativity can simply mean approaching tasks with spontaneity and playfulness, and being willing to take risks. One way to help yourself make that creative

shift is to slow down to speed up. The next time you have so much on you don't know where to start, don't rush headlong into your to-do list. Step back, breathe deep. Time management is never really time management - it's choice management. The other thing you need to do to achieve a flow state involves some mental self-scrutiny. People who feel trapped tend to have conflicting thoughts - for example, you might simultaneously want to earn more money, while also wanting to spend more time with your family. This sort of mental friction gets in the way of your state of flow. To break free, you must acknowledge that these conflicting thoughts exist. Only then will you be able to make real choices about what you actually want to do, and which direction you want to move in. Ultimately, breaking out of the success trap is about self-awareness. It's not about running away and joining the circus - in fact, it may not involve many external changes at all. It's about shifting away from a state of mind where you're so focused on your goals that you're not engaged with what you're doing. And shifting toward a creative attitude where you can make real choices about how you spend your time.

## **Breaking free from your limiting beliefs allows you to reconnect with yourself.**

Gaining self-awareness means looking closely at the assumptions that might be holding you back. By doing so you'll be able to reconnect with what really matters to you. Here's a great technique to help move your thoughts forward. You just need to ask yourself five questions, the first of which is: What thoughts are you experiencing? For instance, imagine a stressed, unmotivated lawyer. She's thinking that she should know her purpose in life but doesn't feel she has one. You might imagine the solution would be for her to find a sense of purpose. But truly scrutinizing her beliefs could reveal a different conclusion. The key message here is: Breaking free from your limiting beliefs allows you to reconnect with yourself. The second of the five questions asks how your thoughts restrict you. For the lawyer, the thought that she should have more of a purpose makes her feel inadequate, causing her to procrastinate and worry. Question three asks whether you choose to believe that negative thought. The lawyer might benefit from saying, No: I choose not to believe I need a sense of purpose. Making that choice can feel like a weight has been lifted. Question four requires that you come up with an opposite thought, and engage with it. The lawyer might say, I don't need to know my purpose. Might this be true? How does it feel to imagine it? Finally, question five gets you to consider what you plan to do now. The lawyer might resolve not to obsess over a sense of purpose after all, but instead, be open to new experiences as they arrive. The exercise has helped her realize that it was her initial question, not the lack of a solution to it, that was trapping her. Questioning your limiting assumptions like this helps you reconnect with yourself. Next, respond: now you're more in tune with your motivations, push a little further, and make a list of which activities drain you and which fill you with energy. Consider how you really want to be spending your time. Last, receive. Being truly receptive means acknowledging your accomplishments and how you feel about your work and life. This sounds simple, but high achievers often struggle with this because it involves shifting out of doing mode and into a more passive state. But, if it helps liberate you from the success trap, it's well worth the effort.

## **Turn uncertainty into opportunity and**

# **make the most of the challenges you face.**

Remember that acronym VUCA from earlier. The world of work is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous – and that’s for everyone, successful people included. But of those four hugely destabilizing factors, there’s one in particular that keeps people clinging to what they know, and that’s uncertainty. When the employment market is so unpredictable, why risk quitting your job? When tech can come along and disrupt things at any moment, why gamble on starting a business? There’s so much uncertainty in the modern world that it can seem overwhelming. And it stops you from taking risks. But with a shift of perspective, an uncertain future can become an opportunity. The key message here is: Turn uncertainty into opportunity and make the most of the challenges you face. One of the reasons you might have become caught in the success trap is because it feels safe. As the saying goes, a ship in harbor is safe, but that’s not what ships are built for! Looking beyond the safety of what you know, and embracing the opportunities of an unpredictable world, will help you thrive outside of the success trap. Turning uncertainty into opportunity is another mindset shift. Consider this example of how it can play out. Athena was a highly-skilled surgeon who seemed set on a glittering medical career, and was working hard to make it happen for sure. But her pursuit of certainty along this well-defined path was stopping her from seeing other options. One day, while working on a funding application that would have led to her taking another step up the ladder, Athena suddenly realized that really doing what she loved wouldn’t involve this particular step at all. In fact, it would mean moving into a different, more research-based role. What’s more, she really could afford to take the financial hit. Athena’s mindset shift had far-reaching consequences. She suddenly saw a world full of opportunities. She made new connections, started new conversations, and found that more options simply started to appear to her. Rather than trying to banish uncertainty from her career, she realized that embracing it could lead to an even more fulfilling way forward. She continued doing medical work – but found roles that allowed her to do more of the stuff she loved. There’s a two-word phrase that summarizes Athena’s way of looking at the world: the entrepreneurial mindset. We’ll take a look at that in the final blink.

## **Even if you’re not a traditional entrepreneur, you can still benefit from an entrepreneurial mindset.**

Unless you’re a business owner, you probably don’t think of yourself as an entrepreneur. But maybe you should. The entrepreneurial mindset isn’t exclusively about setting up shop on your own. It’s a mindset you can use even if you work within an organization. Or even, for that matter, if you’re looking for a new line of work. It’s about attitude, not business plans, and it’s the best way you can flourish in the uncertain yet opportunity-filled world you’ll find yourself in outside of the success trap. The key message here is: Even if you’re not a traditional entrepreneur, you can still benefit from an entrepreneurial mindset. There are three types of entrepreneur. The first is the classic entrepreneur – a business founder bringing something new to the market, full of the energy to come up with completely fresh ideas and see them through. But there are also

the organizational entrepreneurs, or intrapreneurs. These are people who might be employees – but bring creative, dynamic mindsets to the work they do. As an intrapreneur, you can still harness your unique skills and interests and you can take on leadership roles too. You're just doing it for an organization that already exists. Finally, there are the personal entrepreneurs – people who are passionate about taking the initiative and working on causes they love. Personal entrepreneurs are driven individuals who often enjoy making a difference through their work, and they're great at handling career shifts. But remember – whatever you choose for yourself, don't be sucked back into a success trap. For instance, after the author had set up her coaching business, some experienced coaches advised her to start a franchise, which could potentially turn a bigger profit. But she realized that this wasn't the right approach: she preferred to work independently; so she didn't do it. Having an entrepreneurial mindset isn't about a ruthless focus on money – and it's certainly not about craving material success at all costs. It's about looking at the world around you and finding new outlets and opportunities for your particular talents and passions. Falling into the success trap is totally understandable. It's human nature to want security and prosperity, and the volatile, unpredictable nature of work today just heightens that instinct. But there are opportunities all around you – you just need the right mindset to see them clearly.

## Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: What looks from the outside like success is often more complicated when you start to dig deep. High achievement at work leads to its own set of problems, and may well suck you into the success trap. But, by shifting away from a goal-oriented, at-all-costs mentality, and reengaging creatively with your unique talents and interests, you can fashion a more fulfilling career for yourself. And here's some actionable advice: Identify your zone of genius. High achievers are good at what they do. Over time, in fact, they've probably become very good at it. You may even have several zones of excellence. But what's your zone of genius? Is there one thing you do professionally that you really excel at, that really ticks all the boxes for you and makes the most of what you have to offer the world? Try to pin down your zone of genius – because doing more of it can only be a good thing.