



How Successful People Remain Successful

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*When James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras wrote their hugely popular 1994 book, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, they began by stating clearly that they did not mean to write about visionary leaders, product concepts or market insights. Their goal was to find visionary companies -- the crown jewels of their industries -- and discover what made them extraordinary. The 18 visionary companies, the authors found, had a core ideology that helped sustain them in good times and bad. Then questions arose about the extent to which the principles of *Built to Last* might apply to individuals in addition to companies. That sparked another investigation that has now led to a follow-up book, *Success Built to Last*, which will be published by [Wharton School Publishing](#) later this year.*



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*Mark Thompson and Stewart Emery, co-authors with Porras of *Success Built to Last*, spoke recently with Knowledge@Wharton about their new book. In addition, the authors are conducting a [global survey](#) on how people think about success; a link to the survey can also be found at the end of this interview.*

Knowledge@Wharton: What prompted you to write this book?

Emery: It started with a conversation that Mark and I had with Jerry Porras about whether the ideas in the original *Built to Last* might apply to individuals. That idea was further fueled in the intervening years between the publication of the hard copy edition and the paperback edition. Jerry and Jim (Collins) received letters from people who had reported successfully using some of the principles of *Built to Last* in their personal lives. This prompted a whole lot of inquiry which gave birth to *Success Built to Last*.

Thompson: The original premise of *Built to Last* was visionary companies. The idea was that a visionary organization would have more enduring success -- but what about individuals in terms of their work and lives? What about careers built to last? What about a life built to last? What could we learn from people from a wide variety of professions who had had enduring impact in their work for decades? These were not one-hit wonders or superficial successes; these were people who were able to make a contribution and have enduring impact. That is what we wanted the new book to explore.

Knowledge@Wharton: Is that the main difference between *Built to Last* and *Success Built to Last* -- the first book focused on companies while the new one is about individuals? Are there other differences as well?

Thompson: That was the fundamental driving principle that created the project. As Stewart was saying, the fact is that people were reaching out and looking at their careers and their lives to see if they could find a way to use the metaphor and the power of [the book].

Emery: Historically there are a couple of other things that have transpired in the 11 or 12 years between when this book will come out and the original *Built to Last* hit the bookstores. Life expectancies have gone up, and it turns out that people are likely on average to far outlive the average life of corporations. So how do you create a life built to last, particularly from the point of view of *Success Built to Last*? And then, if you consider the fact that people might have multiple careers, what are the attributes that are

essential to the individual to allow that kind of reinvention? While careers may come and go, the success of the individual is sustained across multiple careers. That became a driving force as we got into our research.

Knowledge@Wharton: You interviewed a number of remarkable people -- or 'builders,' as you call them -- for your book. What were your initial findings and how did these individuals think about success?

Thompson: We found that three fundamental principles drive lasting success; these need to interact with one another and also to be integrated and aligned. We describe them in our first chapter in a diagram with three intersecting circles -- meaning, thought and action -- and the bull's eye is where they all come together. We found that individuals across the spectrum of professions were striving to find something that mattered to them in a very fundamental way. This prompted them to drive their thoughts to frame a way of producing those results -- and then acting on those results.

If you take any one of those principles away -- for example, if you take meaning away from thought and action -- you might be successful in the short term. This is because you have a plan in your head and execute against it. But if your plan is disassociated from meaning, it might not matter. And it wouldn't have the meaning which sustains you through the inevitable challenges and difficulties of trying to create a career. That fundamental step of finding meaning, finding the passion that matters to you and that drives your behavior, is often skipped.

When we interviewed people for our book, we learned that whether you are Jack Welch or the Dalai Lama, it is dangerous not to do what you love. If you don't have a level of passion that drives your thinking about what you're doing day in and day out, there will be others out there who are passionate who will overtake and outrun you. People who care will take the initiative away from those who are half-hearted. So loving what you do is a competitive imperative, not simply a nice thing to have.

Knowledge@Wharton: Loving what you do and being passionate about it is certainly a necessary condition for success. But don't you think that timing and chance also play a part? For example, what about people whose ideas are too far ahead of their times?

Thompson: You earn your luck in those circumstances. In other words, if you are willing to invest in going deep into developing your skill set and knowledge, and you are passionate about what you do, then when circumstances work in your favor or against you, you're better prepared for opportunities that present themselves.

There is one thing that we discovered consistently about people who were enduringly successful. If you ask them about their careers, they will say, "Well, it was a bit of a serendipitous journey. I started out with a focus area that I cared about and became an expert at, and then the opportunities started to present themselves." And yes, many of them stayed with their chosen area when the timing wasn't right and when the circumstances did not work in their favor. If you ask them about it, they will describe the pain that they went through, and how difficult that was, and how they stuck with it and eventually prevailed.

We have a chapter in the book that's called "Wounded Wisdom." It deals with people who found that they were better off taking advantage of a later opportunity than an earlier one. Now, it's hard to say whether they are re-framing that question after the fact in an optimistic fashion. But people describe their journey as one where they had many setbacks and difficulties, but because they had the courage of their convictions, they were able to prevail and have lasting impact.

Emery: The question you asked earlier was about how these people think about success. The answer is that they don't. People don't start out to be successful -- they start out to be very good at what matters to them. And when timing and circumstances come together, then they end up with success.

One of the issues we are very clear about is that success needs to be redefined. This is because if you read the definition of success in the dictionary, it sounds like it was written for sociopaths. If you go to Oxford or Webster -- whether you take a dictionary from either side of the Atlantic -- they define success in the same way, as the accumulation of influence, power, wealth and accolades. We see a lot of people chasing that kind of success. What's remarkable is that a few people whom we talked to have achieved that kind of success, but it was never their goal.

A lot of people are experiencing incredible success. Although they don't think about it per se, they have rich lives and they are having an impact that will probably benefit the world way beyond their lifetime. The traditional definition of success doesn't fit their lives at all. What we have here is an historic opportunity to start a global dialogue about success. That's our intention -- to challenge Webster to alter its dictionary definition. That is why we decided to do a global success survey.

Knowledge@Wharton: Do people think about success in the same way over time or does that definition change? For example, do people think about success in the same way in the beginning of their careers as they do at the end?

Thompson: That's very interesting, because the definition might shift over time. We've spoken to CEOs who, for example, learned from earlier experiences that perhaps they were too focused on getting into the corner office, and they might feel about it differently later in terms of what their priorities should be. But in terms of the overarching focus in their lives, it wasn't the traditional definition of success.

Emery: I'd say what appears to be constant is that the principles don't change over time. What defines these people's lives is their commitment to doing something that is meaningful to them. If they're pursuing a cause of public service, certainly they are living a life of service, but they are also clear that this life serves them. So it's not an either/or situation. They never talk about it as a sacrifice, and so that principle of having an anchor to what is meaningful to them never changes.

And another thing we noticed in our research is that when you talk to these people, after a while you feel something is missing from the conversation. Mark and I have explored this, and we realized that what is missing is that they never blame anybody for their circumstances or their mishaps.

They also never hold themselves to be victims of anything. It was astonishing to be with Senator John McCain in his office in Washington. Regardless of your politics, it's astonishing to listen to a man who is a true hero, who went through extraordinary physical pain and deprivation, and who talks about being grateful for the transformational experience he had in Vietnam.

Knowledge@Wharton: One of the most interesting ideas in your book is that successful people harvest their failures. How do successful people stay successful?

Thompson: The chapter we spoke about earlier focuses on people who take their wounds and turn them into wisdom. For example, Charles Schwab, the founder of the successful investment bank, is a lifelong dyslexic. John Chambers, the CEO of Cisco Systems, and Richard Branson, CEO of Virgin, also had learning disabilities. Even though some of these difficulties were intractable, they chose to see them as an opportunity.

Some people have enormous setbacks in their lives, or they make mistakes, but you have to learn from your mistakes. As Quincy Jones, the musician, asked us, when was the last time you actually did that? When did you take the lessons from a setback and put them to use? These people were very consistent

about looking to success and failure as feedback. In other words, it's all input. Sometimes, success can make you sloppy, just as a setback can make you [understand] more clearly what works and what doesn't. They're disciplined about looking at how things had good or bad results and seeing them as opportunities for improvement.

Editor's Note: *The authors of Success Built to Last are conducting a World Success Survey whose goal is to begin a global dialogue about redefining traditional views of success. Participants in the survey will receive a free chapter of their book and also a significant discount on the book when it is published later this year. [To take part in the survey, please click here.](#)*

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