

# Nine Practices of the Most Successful People in Business

by Tom Ross, Chairman and CEO of Alert Management Systems

During my 33 years in the Advertising Agency business, I had the privilege of working with many highly successful top executives of leading global Companies, including several Fortune 500 Companies.

In my later years, I made a practice to try to observe and figure out why some people were so successful over time, while others were not.

I met highly successful individuals who were somewhat reserved and introverted, while others were highly charismatic and extroverted. Some were highly and obviously aggressive and competitive in everything they did; others were only overtly competitive in their approach to their business competitors.

Some of the most successful people I met were trim and athletic looking; others were quite the opposite.

A few of the most successful were highly intelligent and intellectual in their approach. A few were highly affable and easy to like. More, however, struck me as quite normal in terms of basic smarts and likeability.

Clearly, in my experience, basic personality types, physical characteristics, raw intelligence and likeability were all poor predictors of success.

What did seem to set people apart was the specific ways they approached their jobs. With apologies to Stephen Covey, the insightful author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, here are the nine practices that best characterize the most successful individuals I have met and worked with over an extended period of time.

These practices turn employees into executives and people who start their own businesses. They are the same characteristics that help distinguish them as among the best of today's CEO's.

## 1. Successful People Find Something They Love doing.

Business work is not easy work. It requires great concentration, organization, efficiency of effort and persistence. It can be tedious. Sometimes we have to redo the same project over and over in order to get it right.

The most successful people are in touch with themselves. They

understand their own basic interests and talent. In time, they find something they just love doing, something that is inherently fun to do. For them, it's the kind of work that really isn't work at all. It's something that is hard to put down. It's something they can't wait to get back to doing.

## 2. Successful People Spend All Their Time Getting Better At Their Jobs.

The most successful people are always "sharpening the saw" as Stephen Covey wrote in one of his famous books.

They read avidly about their chosen field and business in general. They seek out additional training opportunities and new challenges.

Interestingly, the most successful people don't need a lot of praise. They seem to have a built-in self praise system. Like everyone else, they appreciate positive feedback, but they can live without it. Ironically, whenever they have a great boss they get a lot of praise for the great work they do, but they don't live for it. They are internally driven. They seem to know when they have done a great job; this is the primary source of their satisfaction.

Incidentally, they don't spend a lot of time worrying about who is getting ahead and who isn't. They avoid getting trapped into office politics and idle gossip. They don't have time for it because they are working so hard at improving their own skills and productivity.

They are undaunted by the risk of failure. They volunteer for particularly tough jobs where others have failed. They know that they may fail as well, but they also understand that if they succeed it will be a very meaningful accomplishment.

In a nutshell, they just spend all their time getting better and better at doing their jobs.

## 3. Successful People Find Ways to Make The Boss Look Good.

We all have "bosses," even CEO's! Most CEO's report to a Board of Directors. Even if they don't, even if they own 100% of their companies, the most successful CEO's view their

clients and their employees as their "bosses." And then they move heaven and earth to help these bosses be successful and make them look good.

This is a particularly difficult practice, especially if one is having issues with one's boss.

Nevertheless, the most successful people find a way to make this work. They learn their boss' priorities and work day and night to accomplish them.

When they succeed they also usually find that the boss is highly appreciative. (This is particularly true with bosses who are having difficulties managing people.) And then a funny thing happens. Successful people discover that there is actually much to like and admire in their boss, despite his or her faults.

The most successful people resist the temptation to ever say anything negative behind the boss' back. They know it's unproductive. Negative comments always manage to find their way back to the boss. This just magnifies the problem.

## 4. Successful People Work Long, Hard, Productive Hours.

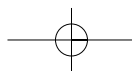
Probably because they love their jobs, the most successful people make it a practice to put in extra hours of work. They are among the first to arrive in the morning and the last to leave in the evening.

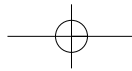
In the early stages of their careers, they make a point of really understanding the mission and vision of their company. Then they are driven to contribute to it. As CEO's they define their own missions and visions and get others to buy in passionately.

The most successful people are also self-starters. They figure out what needs to be done and then get after it.

They have lots of ideas. They are also quick to support the ideas of others.

As these successful individuals are moving up in an organization, they quickly understand they are competing with their peers for new opportunities, raises and promotions. They intuitively, and perhaps unconsciously, seem to understand that if they are to excel (i.e. out perform other workers), they need to put in the requisite effort, just as in all of life's other competitive endeavors. As members of a team, even as CEO's,





the most successful people also understand they are competing with other individuals in competitive companies. They are driven to beat the competition.

While at Leo Burnett, I remember hearing a humorous anecdote that dramatizes the point. Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald's, one of our clients in my former profession, was once asked how he felt about the competition. His answer: "I'll tell you what I think about the competition. If I saw a competitor drowning, I'd stick a hose down his throat." Now that is a little beyond the pale, but it illustrates

the problem that all businesses face. If we are to succeed we must be better than our competitors."

The most successful people also understand the difference between urgent and important. They try hard to spend as much time as possible on the important projects. This takes great discipline and organization.

The most successful people all seem to follow this suggestion by a business practices writer. Every project should be rated "A," "B," or "C."

- "A" projects are the most critical to achieving the company's vision.
- "B" projects are important, but not

critical.

• Everything else is a C. The most successful people spend virtually all their time on "A" projects, the ones that will really make a difference in their company's performance. "B" projects wait until all the "A" projects have been completed (they seldom, if ever, are). "C" projects go into your "C" drawer waiting to become obsolete.

- One critical exception: The second time your boss asks for something, it becomes an "A" priority at the very top of your list.

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### 5. Successful People Make Good Choices in Their Lives.

They understand that their life is a product of all the choices they have made up to that time. These choices include what field to pursue, what company to work for, and how to make the most of their time each and every day. They are determined to keep trying to make the right choices.

They understand that the choice is always theirs, not someone else's. They know that no one can make them do anything. They understand that no one can insult them, no one can make them angry and no one can embarrass them. They know that only they can only allow themselves to be insulted, get angry or be embarrassed. They try hard not to let this happen.

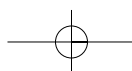
They know they always have a choice as to how they will respond. They are not easily angered. They try to respond unemotionally and with control.

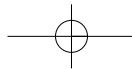
### 6. Successful People Learn From Their Mistakes.

Everyone makes mistakes. In fact, from my observations, I don't think it's too extreme to say that if you aren't making any mistakes, you aren't trying hard enough.

The most successful people are particularly good at learning from their mistakes. To do so, they are very quick to recognize and admit when a mistake has been made. They are not defensive. They are even sometimes too willing to admit it was their mistake. They are open to criticism and suggestion. They are confident in their overall abilities and don't equate mistakes with failure. They understand that when one admits a mistake, the pain of the mistake goes away quickly. Only when we protest in our innocence do we start paying a real price.

This trait alone gives them huge advantage. They waste no time worrying about defending their actions. They just learn from them quickly and move on.





**7. Successful People Know When To Say “Uncle.”**

Successful people have a high built-in tolerance for stress. They don't succumb easily. Generally, they don't work for too many different companies over the course of their careers. They are not quitters by nature. But they know when it's time to say “enough.”

As successful people progress in their careers, they know when it is time to move on. Maybe it's a company that is no longer living up to its potential. Maybe despite their patience and persistence, the individual just can't break out of a situation that is no longer providing the right opportunities for personal growth. Maybe they can't escape a particularly bad situation with their immediate supervisor. Maybe they feel that the management of the company is remote and doesn't appreciate their work or their difficulties. Regardless of the particular stimulus, they realize they no longer love their jobs. They know it's time to move on.

When that day arrives, they manage themselves carefully, making certain not to burn any bridges. When they submit their resignation, they express appreciation for the opportunities they have had. They say good things about their experience and the people they will leave behind. They resist the temptation to point out the issues they have had with the company and its people. They simply say that they have given it their best effort, but the job is no longer right for them at this point in their lives.

As CEO's, the most successful individuals don't sit on a dead horse very long. They are among the first to recognize when an idea or a program or a whole division is past its prime and needs to be replaced with something more productive.

**8. Over Time, the most Successful People Become Great Managers.**

There is not one style that leads to great success. A few are very tough bosses. Some get the job done with a much lighter touch. In a nutshell, the most successful managers simply inspire their people to be the very best they can be.

My friend Robal Johnson, an associate of the American Management Association, is among the most effective management consultants on the planet. He offers the following top ten characteristics of highly effective managers:

- They are realistically critical in

- evaluating subordinates.
- They select and promote competent people, carefully.
- They fire incompetents quickly.
- They develop subordinates. Feedback is positive and constructive.
- They set a fast pace and create a sense of urgency.
- They have a positive and enthusiastic attitude.
- They are excellent communicators and listeners.
- They make demands of subordinates.
- They have a practical results orientation.
- They take risks and are decisive.

(You can learn more about Robal Johnson and RAJ Associates at [rajassoc.com](http://rajassoc.com))

Regarding Robal's point on developing subordinate's, I have observed that the most successful managers spend an inordinate amount of time training and developing their people. On the way up, the most successful people get their people to do their work so they can do their boss' work. As CEO's they are well equipped to get the maximum potential from their people. They keep right on training and developing their people which takes extra time. So often, it is so much easier to do a job oneself rather than teach someone else how to do it. In the long run, however, this training pays huge dividends for both the manager and the employee.

They also fight for their people. They lobby for raises, promotions and new opportunities for their best people.

As a result, the most successful managers inspire great loyalty from their people and theirs is a coveted

team to be part of. In addition to focusing on employee development, the most successful people are also keenly self-aware. They keep seeking out constructive criticism and other opportunities to improve themselves.

**9. Finally, Importantly, the Most Successful People Know How To Put Some Balance in Their Lives.**

Despite their long work hours, they also know how to lead complete lives. They are highly organized and don't waste much time so they can do more with less time.

They find time for outside friendships. They seek out these friendships within their industry and beyond.

They often are avid about a sport like skiing, running, golf, or tennis or a hobby like gardening or woodworking.

They find a way to build strong family relationships. They devise ways to spend quality time with their spouses and their children. They often find time for religious activities. They almost always find time for civic responsibilities.

They are not one dimensional.

**One Final Thought**

I need to acknowledge that luck also plays a role in anyone's success. Nevertheless, I try to remind myself of something my father used to tell me: “Luck is being prepared to take advantage of opportunity.” I also try to remember a sign I saw at a golf course in Colorado Springs: “The more I practice, the luckier I get.”

I wish you much good practice.



Tom Ross is the Chairman and CEO of Alert Management Systems, developer of the Alert EasyPro hire management

software system. Alert software is licensed to thousands of users in hundreds of locations in the US and four other countries, including New Zealand and Australia.

He joined Alert in 2004, following a successful career in advertising for the world's leading brands, such as McDonald's, Proctor & Gamble, Heinz, Keebler, Kraft General Foods,

Altoids, and many others. He retired from Leo Burnett Advertising in 1997, as Executive Vice President Client Services and a major principal. Over the next few years, Tom mounted a failed attempt to become a great senior golfer. He also started devoting more attention to his Profitability Consultancy, helping smaller companies improve their profitability.

In 2002, he was hired as a consultant to help Alert improve its profit performance. The effort proved so successful that Tom joined the Board as an outside Director in 2003. With a new found passion for the hire business and software development, Tom soon gave up his Don Quixote golf ambitions to join Alert full time.

