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A Call for a Movement to Redefine the Successful Life

By ALINA TUGEND

EVERY day, news releases and books cross my desk that promise success in all sorts of areas — getting a job, getting a better job, managing your employees, managing your boss, managing your relationships.

Some are interesting, some are ridiculous and many are repetitive takes on the same theme. But recently, I came across two items that, separately, talked about an issue I've tackled before in one of my columns — questioning what we actually mean by success.

That column, [which appeared almost a year ago](#) to the day, discussed how we shouldn't always aim for the extraordinary, but celebrate the ordinary. It was one of my most popular articles ever.

So I was intrigued when I was told that a conference was being held on the very issue of redefining success. And, separately, that American Express had recently released a study showing that Americans were thinking of success in different ways than in the past.

“The Third Metric: Redefining Success Beyond Money & Power” was the conference presented last week by Mika Brzezinski, host of MSNBC's “Morning Joe,” and Arianna Huffington, editor in chief of the Huffington Post, at Ms. Huffington's new apartment in TriBeCa (some 200 people squeezed into her living room).

Panels, covering topics ranging from “Managing a Frenetic Life” to “Wellness and the Bottom Line,” featured a number of prominent people, among them the actress Candice Bergen and Valerie Jarrett, a senior adviser to President Obama.

The message, one that Ms. Huffington is promoting in her publication and in speeches, is particularly aimed at women. “The way we define success isn't working,” Ms. Huffington said at the conference. “More, bigger, better — we can't do that anymore.”

The concepts seem a little fuzzy at times, but the overarching thesis is that it is the common wisdom of how to achieve success: sleep four hours a night, work see your family rarely and never admit the need for downtime.



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That system is wearing us down, Ms. Huffington said. In her commencement speech this year at Smith College, she told students, “If we don’t redefine success, the personal price we pay will get higher and higher. And as the data shows, the price is even higher for women than for men. Already women in stressful jobs have a nearly 40 percent increased risk of heart disease and a 60 percent greater risk for diabetes.

“Right now, America’s workplace culture is practically fueled by stress, sleep deprivation and burnout,” she said.

The answer? To create a movement that embraces the idea that physical and spiritual wellness — from meditation to exercise to good nutrition — are integral to, not separate from, a successful life.

She cited as one example the two nap rooms available for Huffington Post employees, which employees were at first afraid to use because they feared it looked as if they were shirking their duties. Now they are always booked.

Another answer: To build workplaces where empathy and kindness are rewarded, in the somewhat corny terminology of the speakers, where a go-giver is as desirable as a go-getter.

It all sounds wonderful, of course, but how does this fit into our society? Many people are working harder for less money, are concerned less about spiritual wholeness than basic health care, and find it hard to carve out time for a short coffee break, let alone a nap.

“This is well-intentioned and important,” Senator Claire McCaskill, Democrat of Missouri, said to me after she spoke at the conference, while acknowledging that “it’s luxurious to have the ability to rethink time in your life.”

It is easy to dismiss these ideas as the privileges available only to those who no longer have to worry about money or power. But perhaps a better reaction would be to find a way to incorporate them into public policy and to ensure that such ideas find their way from the bosses to the workers.

“The whole issue of overwork cuts across class,” said Ellen Galinsky, president of the nonprofit Families and Work Institute. “We consistently find that one out of three employees feel overwhelmed by everything they have to do at work.”

The institute’s latest National Study of the Changing Workforce conducted in 2008 — phone interviews of more than 3,000 Americans — found that the No. 1 correlation between better health, such as less frequent minor health problems and fewer signs of depression, was economic security.

The next are “work-life fit” and “autonomy” or more control over your work environment.

Ms. Galinsky and Ms. Huffington agreed that the phrase work/life balance should have been retired long ago.

“For decades, I’ve hated the term work/life balance,” Ms. Galinsky said. “It implies a scale where one thing takes away from the other. A good life can enhance your job and vice versa.” A work/life fit, she said, doesn’t keep work on one side of the equation and life on the other, but weaves them together.

Some examples are schedule flexibility and co-workers and supervisors who are supportive and responsive to personal and family business.

Ms. Galinsky said her institute had drawn up a list of six criteria for an effective workplace, with effective being defined as having employees who are highly engaged, satisfied and planning to remain with their organization.

These criteria are: challenging and learning on the job, autonomy, work-life fit, support from a supervisor, a work climate of respect and trust and, of course, economic security.

“There is no one magic bullet,” she said. “We have six ingredients and none are stand-alone. It’s not just about flexibility — flexibility and a horrible boss don’t make a wonderful life.”

The idea that people are eager to find — or define — success outside the normal parameters is backed up by a study done for American Express.

The top ways people define a successful life, according to the study: Being in good health, finding time for the important things in life, having a good marriage/relationship and knowing how to spend money well.

The Futures Company, which assisted in the American Express study, also issues the annual U.S. Yankelovich Monitor, a report that has been conducted since 1971 that assesses Americans’ attitudes, lifestyles and values.

According to the Monitor report, many fewer people see owning an expensive car as a sign of success, while being satisfied and in control of your life have grown over the years.

“It doesn’t mean that material success is unimportant,” said Peter J. Rose, senior vice president of the Futures Company. Rather, intangibles, like a good marriage and being able to take a day off when desired have grown in importance when defining success.

The Third Metric conference and the American Express study demonstrate a trend — or maybe

the hope of a trend — that we can reinterpret success beyond the traditional signposts of wealth and concrete achievement.

As Ms. Galinsky said, it's a good philosophy and goal to aim for, but the real question will be, "How do we make the ideas applicable to everyone in the work force, not just to those who are already very successful?"

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