

THE BIG IDEAS

Common Denominator
Defined.

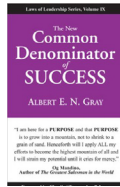
What Drives Your Show?
Pleasing results or methods?

The Engine?
Purpose.

Time to Stop Avoiding
And start leaning in.

How Futures Are Formed
One habit at a time.

Resolve. Follow Thru.
Repeat. Create new world.



The Common Denominator of Success

Laws of Leadership, Volume IX

BY ALBERT E.N. GRAY · TREMENDOUS LIFE BOOKS © 2008 · 43 PAGES

“And so I set out on a voyage of discovery which carried me through biographies and autobiographies and all sorts of dissertations on success and the lives of successful men until I finally reached a point at which I realized that the secret I was trying to discover lay not only in what men did, but also in what made them do it.

I realized further that the secret for which I was searching must not only apply to every definition of success, but since it must apply to everyone to whom it was offered, it must also apply to everyone who had ever been successful. In short, I was looking for the common denominator of success.”

~ Albert E.N. Gray from *The Common Denominator of Success*

This is a dinky little pamphlet of a book based on a speech [Albert E.N. Gray](#) gave to a group of Prudential life insurance agents back in 1940.

I hesitated to do a Note on it for a while because it's so short (this Note will be about as long as the “book”) but it's so packed with goodness that I figured we'd have fun unpacking the wisdom.

(Plus, I got such great feedback on *Courage Under Fire* by [James Stockdale](#)—which was another super short speech-book I almost didn't create a Note on—so here we are. And... While we're on the topic, [James Allen's](#) *As a Man Thinketh* falls under the super-short-but-awesome category as well as do [Wallace D. Wattles's](#) *Science of Being Great* + *Science of Getting Rich!* :)

You can get the little pamphlet-like book here [here](#) or free online versions [here](#).

With that, let's jump in and see how we can apply this common denominator of success to our lives!

First, let's define it.

THE COMMON DENOMINATOR OF SUCCESS

“The common denominator of success—the secret of success of every person who has ever become successful—lies in the fact that he or she formed the habit of doing things that failures don't like to do.”

There ya go.

The Common Denominator of Success.

—> *Successful people formed the habit of doing things that failures don't like to do.*

More precisely, successful people formed the habit of doing things even THEY did not necessarily always like to do.

The successful people were more interested in the RESULTS of their work than making sure they “felt” like doing something every step of the way.

“ Nothing contributes so much to tranquilizing the mind as a steady purpose—a point on which the soul may fix its intellectual eye.”

~ Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

" Find a purpose so big it will challenge every capacity to be at your best."

~ David O. McKay

Funny thing: I'm writing this even earlier than normal on a day I (unintentionally) got up super early. For some reason (I have a few ideas :), I woke up a little after 2 am this morning after < 6 hours of sleep. Now, if you've read any of my Notes or watched Optimal Sleep 101, you know I REALLY like 8 hours of sleep. (Hah.) It's my [#1 self-care habit](#).

Although I wasn't too frustrated about it (#nbd / "no big deal" as Emerson and I like to say), I got up and committed to having a great morning. Meditated for 20 minutes. 5 minutes of stretching/yoga and sat down to work.

And... I had considerably less enthusiasm than usual. :) But, and this was actually quite exciting for me: IT DIDN'T MATTER.

It's Wednesday AM1. On Wednesday's in my AM1 deep work time block, I create a Note. Period. I have installed super bright lines such that there is *no possible way* I'm going to hop online and just kinda sorta do whatever I "feel" like doing.

(The old me would have been driven by my mood. The new me really doesn't care that much how I feel. (Laughing.) It's got work to do.)

And, somewhat paradoxically, that FEELS SO GREAT it's hard to put words to it.

Actually, [David Reynolds](#) captures it brilliantly (and inspired me to make this my reality) in [Constructive Living](#): "The mature human being goes about doing what needs to be done regardless of whether that person feels great or terrible. Knowing that you are the kind of person with that kind of self-control brings all the satisfaction and confidence you will ever need. Even on days when the satisfaction and confidence just aren't there, you can get the job done anyway."

All this reminds me of [Michael Phelps](#) in his great book [No Limits](#) (see Notes) where he tells us pretty much exactly the same thing.

"[Coach] Bob [Bowman]'s coaching philosophy can be distilled as follows:

Set your goals high. Work conscientiously, every day, to achieve them.

Among the many authors Bob has read, he likes to cite the motivational speaker Earl Nightingale, who survived the attack on Pearl Harbor on the USS Arizona, then went on to a career in broadcasting. The way Bob tells it, Nightingale's work revealed the one thing that's common to all successful people: They make a habit of doing things that unsuccessful people don't like to do.

There are plenty of people with some amount of talent. Are you willing to go farther, work harder, be more committed and dedicated than anyone else?"

Phelps also puts it this way: "One thing that separates Michael from other swimmers, Bob likes to say, is that if they don't feel good they don't swim good.

That's not the way it is for Michael. Michael, he says, performs no matter what he's feeling. He has practiced it for a long time. He knows exactly what he wants to get done, and he's able to compartmentalize what's important.

Bob, with his seemingly endless collection of sayings, naturally has an acronym to describe the mental aspect to my racing. It's 'W.I.N.': What's Important Now?"

It's true. When it comes down to it, when the time comes to focus and be mentally prepared, I can do whatever it takes to get there, in any situation."

<— I'm interviewing Bob Bowman soon. Can't wait to share.

For now, let's remember what's important now and do the things other people can't or won't do.

" I believe that the intense purpose, the moral integrity, the self-loyalty that makes a man carry through whatever he undertakes is the biggest single factor in fitting his mind for great accomplishments."

~ Fred B. Robinson

PLEASING RESULTS VS. PLEASING METHODS

"Above all, be of a single aim; have a legitimate and useful purpose, and devote yourself unreservedly to it."

~ James Allen

"The successful are influenced by the desire for pleasing results. Failures are influenced by the desire for pleasing methods and are inclined to be satisfied with such results as can be obtained by doing things they like to do."

Continuing on our prior theme, successful people are more driven by pleasing RESULTS of their actions than "pleasing methods."

In other words, they're fired up by what they're committed to creating (in Phelps's case it was, among other things, an unprecedented number of gold medals; in mine, it's helping people optimize, creating 1,000 Notes, etc.).

They're willing to tolerate some discomfort in the pursuit of those results.

We talked about this in [The Confidence Gap](#). Here's how [Russ Harris](#) puts it: "Suppose I could give you a choice about how to live your life. There are two options:

Option 1: for the rest of your life, you only take action to do the things that are really important to you if you are in the mood, psyched up, and feeling good. In other words, you spend the rest of your days on this planet at the mercy of your emotions. If you're in the mood or you feel good, then you do the things that make your life work. But if your mood drops or you don't feel good, then you give up doing the things that truly matter, and put your life on hold until such time as you feel good, positive, inspired again.

Option 2: for the rest of your life you take action to do the things that are really important to you, whether you are in the mood or not. Whether you feel good or bad, energetic or fearful, inspired or uninspired, you continue to take action; you keep doing what truly matters to you. Instead of going through life at the mercy of your emotions, you can behave like the person you want to be and do the things you want to do, even if you're tired or anxious, or you don't feel like it.

Which do you choose?"

So... Two options...

Which do YOU choose?

P.S. In [Peak](#), [Anders Ericsson](#) makes the same point: The ONLY way we can grow is by being OUTSIDE of our comfort zone—which, by definition (!) is UNcomfortable.

Let's get really comfortable with being UNcomfortable.

Best way to do that? Have a big purpose.

THE ENGINE? PURPOSE.

"Many persons have a wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose."

~ Helen Keller

"Why are the successful able to do things they don't like to do while failures are not? Because the successful have a **purpose** strong enough to make them form the habit of doing things they don't like to do in order to accomplish the **purpose** they want to accomplish."

Two things here: Purpose + Habits.

We'll get to Habits in the next Idea. For now, Purpose.

If we want to be able to do things we don't always like, we MUST have a strong purpose.

A reason for doing something that moves beyond mere personal interest and includes a commitment to something bigger than ourselves.

[Angela Duckworth](#) echoes this wisdom in [Grit](#).

"He who wishes to fulfill his mission in the world must be a man of one idea, that is, of one great overmastering purpose, overshadowing all his aims, and guiding and controlling his entire life."

~ Julius Bate

She tells us: *"To be gritty is to keep putting one foot in front of the other. To be gritty is to hold fast to an interesting and purposeful goal. To be gritty is to invest, day after week after year, in challenging practice. To be gritty is to fall down seven times, and rise eight."*

What's YOUR Purpose? What's driving you?

Can you capture your purpose in a sentence or two?

My Purpose: _____
_____.

THAT is our compass and our catalyst.

(P.S. So much more on discovering/living your Purpose in [Purpose 101](#), of course.)

TIME TO STOP AVOIDING

"It is easier to adjust ourselves to the hardships of a poor living than it is to adjust ourselves to the hardships of making a better one. If you doubt me, just think of all the things you are willing to go without in order to avoid doing the things you don't like to do."

That's fantastic.

Translation in case anything was lost in that slightly old-school language: It's easier to get comfortable with the limitations of your current life than it is to try to change your habits—and actually DO the things you don't "feel" like doing.

Which, of course, brings us back to our Common Denominator of Success:

—> *Successful people formed the habit of doing things that failures don't like to do.*

And, this brings us back to the importance of a really compelling Purpose + Mission + ONE Thing.

If we want to sustain motivation to change, we need to be fired up about where we're headed.

We need to hit the activation energy point, eh?

As [Orison Swett Marden](#) tells us in [He Can Who Thinks He Can](#): *"Before water generates steam, it must register two hundred and twelve degrees of heat. Two hundred degrees will not do it; two hundred and ten will not do it. The water must boil before it will generate enough steam to move an engine, to run a train. Lukewarm water will not run anything."*

A great many people are trying to move their life trains with lukewarm water—or water that is almost boiling—and they are wondering why they are stalled, why they cannot get ahead. They are trying to run a boiler with two hundred or two hundred and ten degrees of heat, and they cannot understand why they do not get anywhere.

Lukewarmness in his work stands in the same relation to man's achievement as lukewarm water does to the locomotive boiler. No man can hope to accomplish anything great in this world until he throws his whole soul, flings his force to his whole life, into it."

What uncomfortable things *could* you be doing that you're avoiding?

_____.

How would your life be different if you started doing those things consistently?

_____.

"The secret of success is constancy to purpose."

~ Disraeli

How can you dial up the heat on your purpose a little more today to make it easier to rock it?

*"It is the old lesson a
worthy purpose,
patient energy for its
accomplishment, a
resoluteness undaunted
by difficulties, and then
success."*

~ W.M. Punshon

WE FORM HABITS & HABITS FORM FUTURES

"Every single qualification for success is acquired through habit. We form habits and habits form futures. If you do not deliberately form good habits, then unconsciously you will form bad ones. You are the kind of person you are because you have formed the habit of being that kind of person, and the only way you can change that is through habit."

Habits. Habits. Habits.

Habits are the engine of our success. They are powered by the steam of our activated purpose.

We'll keep this one super simple.

What's the #1 thing you could be doing that, if you did it consistently, would have THE most positive impact on your life?

This is it: _____.

And, what's the #1 thing you could STOP doing that, if you stopped doing it, would have THE most positive impact on your life?

This is it: _____.

Remember: We form habits and our habits form our futures. Period.

([Habits 101](#) anyone?)

MAKE A RESOLUTION. FOLLOW THRU. REPEAT. CREATE NEW WORLD.

"Any resolution you make is simply a promise to yourself, which isn't worth a thing unless you have formed the habit of making it and keeping it. And you won't form the habit of making it and keeping it unless right at the start you link it with a definite purpose that can be accomplished by keeping it. In other words, any resolution or decision you make today has to be made again tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, and so on. And it not only has to be made each day, but it has to be kept each day, for if you miss one day in the making or keeping of it, you've got to go back and begin all over again. But if you continue the process of making it each morning and keeping it each day you will finally wake up some morning a different person in a different world and you will wonder what has happened to you and the world you used to live in."

So, first we make a resolution to change a certain part of our behavior. We need to connect that to a deeper purpose. We need to START WITH WHY. Got it.

Then? Then the fun begins.

We need to make that commitment today. And keep that commitment today.

Then we need to make that commitment again tomorrow. And keep that commitment tomorrow.

Day after day after day.

—> *Successful people formed the habit of doing things that failures don't like to do.*

We talk about this in [Habits 101](#) and I love the way [Tynan](#) describes it in [Superhuman by Habit](#): "You should be very scared to fail to execute a habit, even once. By failing to execute, potentially you're not just losing a minor bit of progress, but rather threatening the cumulative benefits you've accrued by establishing a habit. This is a huge deal and should not be treated lightly. So make your habits relatively easy, but never miss doing them."

"The man who forms a purpose which he knows to be right, and then moves forward to accomplish it without inquiring where it will land him as an individual, and without caring what the immediate consequences to himself will be, is the manliest of manly men."

~ John Wanamaker

—> Note: *"Make your habits relatively easy, but never miss doing them."*

(See [Mini Habits](#) for more on the power of keeping things simple and remember that a little of something every.single.day is WAY better than a ton one day and none the others!!)

And, DEFINITELY don't miss two days. That's habit suicide.

Tynan again: *"I was talking to a friend about a daily habit that I had. He asked me what I did when I missed a day. I told him about my strategies and how I tried to avoid missing a day. What do you do when you miss two days, he asked.*

I don't miss two days, I replied.

Missing two days of a habit is habit suicide. If missing one day reduces your chances of long-term success by a small amount like five percent, missing two days reduces it by forty percent or so. Three days missed and you may as well be starting over. At that point you have lost your momentum and have made it far too easy to skip in the future."

Pick your habit. Connect it to your purpose. Commit. Execute. Repeat.

And, remember: **"If you continue the process of making it each morning and keeping it each day, you will finally wake up some morning a different person in a different world, and you will wonder what has happened to you and the world you used to live in."**

Let's wake up in that new world as we embrace The Common Denominator of Success and give our gifts most fully to the world,

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

P.S. Without looking back, what's The Common Denominator of Success? Here's to [Making It Stick](#) in our minds and in our lives! :)

If you liked this Note, you'll probably like...

[As a Man Thinketh](#)

[No Limits](#)

[Constructive Living](#)

[Grit](#)

[Superhuman by Habit](#)

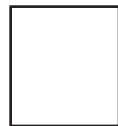
[Mini Habits](#)

[The Science of Being Great](#)

[The Science of Getting Rich](#)

About the Author of "The Common Denominator of Success"

ALBERT E.N. GRAY



Albert E. N. Gray was an official of the Prudential Insurance Company of America and a highly sought after speaker. In 1940 he delivered the message from this small book to the National Association of Life Underwriters at their annual convention. His little book was a major influence on Charlie "Tremendous" Jones who published it through his Executive Books company. He has influenced many of the leading motivational speakers and writers of our time including Stephen Covey, Charlie Jones, and many more.

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.