

Defining Success

Hasaan Khawar on the changing definition of success through his life experience

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What does success actually mean for a working professional? The answer usually arrives without much thought: a better salary, a bigger title, the next promotion. What almost never happens is a pause to ask whether reaching these markers will actually leave us feeling like we've succeeded. Hasaan Khawar hasn't settled on a final answer either, but decades of living with the question have taught him to recognise the factors that quietly shape how we define success.

A Definition That Kept Moving

Hasaan's sense of what success meant had shifted continuously, redrawn at each stage of his career. As a child, success was simple: performing well in exams, then waiting patiently for summer vacation. In 1986, still in school, the definition narrowed to becoming an engineer or a doctor, since the sciences were considered superior to everything else at the time, and were thought to promise greater financial reward. He did not know what engineers actually did or how they lived. It was simply the accepted marker of achievement. By 1996, at twenty and in engineering university, the target had shifted to the civil service, which felt like the answer to every question. That gave way to an MBA once he was married with two children and needed more money than the civil service could offer.

At forty, success meant decent earnings, travel, and a reasonably successful consulting career. He wanted to create impact, do meaningful work, expand his social connections, and build a personal brand, and for a time he did, becoming Information Advisor in Punjab and holding cabinet positions. Even then, the definition kept evolving. By now, close to fifty, it centres on happiness, strong friendships, and a more modest but still real need for financial stability.

Looking back over the whole arc, he offered two broad observations. First, four things drove his choices throughout: financial capital, intellectual stimulation, social capital, and spiritual capital, whether that meant religious practice or drawing meaning from work. Second, the definition of success started out simple, grew complex as life grew more complex, peaked, and then began to simplify again as we age. Older friends in

their seventies, he noted, define success as being able to play with their grandchildren for as long as they can.

What Changes Our Idea of Success

Along this arc, Hasaan explained that the definition of success shifts under a few quiet pressures.

Pain. Whatever is broken in our life tends to define what we call success. Poor health makes fitness the goal. Financial hardship makes a decent meal and a roof overhead the goal. A difficult relationship makes people who love you the goal. In this sense, success becomes about escaping pain, which distorts our sense of what we actually want.

Comparison. He called this the ultimate enemy of success, and the fastest way to turn genuine wealth into a felt poverty. A billionaire who starts comparing himself to Bill Gates or Elon Musk becomes a pauper in his own mind within a minute. Real maturity, he said, is competing against your own inner benchmarks rather than externalising your success and handing control of your life to other people.

The desire to control. Whether it is other people, circumstances, or outcomes, he offered a line that stayed with him: desire is a contract with yourself to be unhappy until the goal is met. In practice, that means staying anxious, or feeling unsuccessful, until reality catches up, whether that is the promotion that keeps getting pushed back or the bonus that never quite arrives. Success, on these terms, gets handed over to something outside yourself, and it stays just out of reach until that other thing decides to arrive. This, Hasaan said, is where faith enters as the answer to that frustration. Since so much of what we want to control sits outside our hands anyway, the way out is not to want less, but to surrender the outcome. The two themes that recur throughout the Quran, in his reading, are gratitude and patience in adversity: gratitude when things go your way, and patience when they do not. Submitting to both, he said, is what allows a person to bear the gap between desire and reality.

A Working Definition of Success

Hasaan admitted he still did not have a complete definition of success, though he felt close. The idea that stayed with him most was this: imagine being on your deathbed and offered another life. If your honest answer is that you would spend it exactly as you spent this one, that is success. Dissected further, this does not mean a spectacular life. It means a life without regret, which matters because most of us are far too hard on ourselves over paths not taken. The encouraging part, he said, is that this kind of success

is available right now, through submission and surrender: believing that things happen for a reason, that you did your best, and that you are exactly where you are meant to be.

Underlying that sense of surrender, though, was something simpler: **the story a person tells themselves**. He gave two examples from his own life. During a month long military attachment in a remote and beautiful part of Kashmir, with no real work and time to walk, play games, and connect with nature, he was unhappy, because in his head he was a prisoner being kept from his friends in Lahore. Years later, living in a one bedroom condo in the US with two young children, one cheap dining set, and mattresses on the floor, he was genuinely happy, because in his head he was an adventurer on a mission to remake his life.

“It’s just the story in your head that really makes or breaks what you are doing.
If you change your story, you change your life.”

Meaning and success alike, Hasaan said, can be drawn from almost anywhere, and depend entirely on the story you choose to tell yourself. One path is seeing your work as part of something larger, a trailblazer bringing a shift to your own country. Another is the quieter meaning that comes from raising children who go on to do good in the world, an opportunity available to everyone regardless of career. Tell yourself the right story, he said, enjoy the ride, and remember that in the scale of the universe, this life is little more than a blip.