

# The Most Effective Strategies for Success

[Heidi Grant Halvorson](#)

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For years, I've been trying to convince people that success is not about who you *are*, but about what you *do*.

Roughly two years ago, I wrote about the "[Nine Things Successful People Do Differently](#)," which became HBR's most-read piece of content over that time span. It was a list of strategies, based on decades of scientific research, proven effective for setting and reaching challenging goals. I later expanded that post into a short [e-book](#), explaining how you can make each one a habit. But how would readers know if they were doing enough of each "Thing"? (After all, we're [terrible judges](#) of ourselves.) To help answer that question, last spring I created something I called the [Nine Things Diagnostics](#) — it's a free, online set of questionnaires designed to measure your own use of each of the nine things in pursuit of your personal and professional goals.

I now have responses from over 30,000 people who've logged on and completed one or more of the Nine Things Diagnostics. The results are fascinating, and a bit surprising even to me. First, each of the Nine Things had a significant impact on success. (That actually didn't surprise me, for obvious reasons.)

But which packed the biggest punch? To find out, I recently took a look at the responses of about 7,000 people who had completed *every* Nine Things Diagnostic, along with a brief measure of how successful they felt they had been in reaching their own goals in the past.

In order of effect magnitude, the most impactful strategies were:

1. **Have Grit** — Persistence over the long haul is key
2. **Know Exactly How Far You Have Left to Go** — Monitor your progress
3. **Get Specific** — Have a crystal-clear idea of exactly what success will look like
4. **Seize the Moment to Act on Your Goals** — Know in advance what you will do, and when and where you will do it
5. **Focus on What You Will Do, Not What You Won't Do** — Instead of focusing on bad habits, it's more effective to replace them with better ones.
6. **Build your Willpower Muscle** — If you don't have enough willpower, you can get more using it.
7. **Focus on Getting Better, Rather than Being Good** — Think about your goals as opportunities to improve, rather than to prove yourself
8. **Be a Realistic Optimist** — Visualize how you will make success happen by overcoming obstacles
9. **Don't Tempt Fate** — No one has willpower all the time, so don't push your luck

Notice how persistence is at the very top of the list? While we marvel at people who've shown incredible perseverance — Earnest Shackleton, Nelson Mandela, Susan B. Anthony — I wonder how many people have ever thought to blame their own failures on “not hanging in there long enough”? In my experience, very few. Instead, we assume we lack the ability to succeed. We decide that we don't have what it takes — whatever that is — to meet the challenge. And we really couldn't be more wrong. Grit is not an innate gift. Persisting is something we learn to do, when (and if) we realize how well it pays off.

Or take “knowing how far you have left to go.” Even someone with a healthy amount of grit will probably find his or her motivation flagging if they don't have a clear sense of where they are now and where they want to end up. How much weight would a contestant on *The Biggest Loser* lose if he only weighed himself at the beginning and the end, instead of once a week? How well would an Olympic-level athlete perform if she only timed her official races, and never her practices? We can see how essential monitoring is for others' performance, and yet somehow miss its importance for our own.

But does that mean that the items further down the list aren't as important? Not quite. For instance, #7, “focusing on getting better, rather than being good,” actually predicted using each of the other eight things! People who focused on “being good,” on the other hand, were less likely to use the other tactics on the list. In fact, if you do a lot of “be good” thinking, you are less likely to be gritty or have willpower, and you are more likely to tempt fate. You're also, not surprisingly, less likely to reach your goals.

Perhaps the most remarkable finding, however, was the extent to which people *weren't* using these tactics.

Respondents answered each of the diagnostic questions on 1-5 scale, with 1 being “not at all true of me,” 3 being “somewhat true of me,” and 5 being “very true of me.”

If your average score for a particular tactic falls between Not at all and Somewhat, then you really aren't doing what you need to do to be effective. Here's how the percentages break down:

So about 40 percent of responders aren't being realistically optimistic, or focusing on what they will do, rather than what they won't. And 50 percent of responders aren't being specific, seizing the moment, monitoring progress, having grit, and having willpower. An astonishing 70+ percent of respondents also don't bother avoiding tempting fate. (Apparently, people just love to put themselves in harm's way.)

Here's some good news: an incredible 90 percent of responders report pursuing at least some of their goals with Get Better mindsets. But here's the Bad News: 80 percent of responders are also pursuing goals with Be Good mindsets. So there's still way too much I-have-to-prove-myself thinking going on out there, and it's sabotaging our success.

If you have a few spare minutes, I encourage you to take the [Nine Things Diagnostics](#) yourself, assuming you haven't already. It's a quick yet powerful way to target your weaknesses (and learn about your strengths). Remember, improvement is only possible when you know where you're going wrong, and what you can do about it.