

THE MEANING OF SIGNIFICANCE
AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MEANING



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We're all driven by a need for significance. In fact, Willard Harley's research on emotional needs implies that for most of us, significance is our number one emotional need. In system dynamics, we'd call significance a need, a problem, or a problem symptom. If you're tracking with me, we're aimed toward quick fixes, fundamental solutions, unintended consequences, fixes that fail, and shifting the burden. If significance is such a powerful emotional need for so many of us, learning about the influences on and the influences of significance is a worthwhile exercise.

Let's first consider the problem symptom or need (the gap between what we have and what we want) to be the need for significance. The type of significance I'm talking about is having worth, of being important to someone or something – to matter. We want to be significant in the world we desire to be part of. Our need for significance is not just a measure of the significance we want but also a measure of the significance we perceive ourselves as having.

In trying to meet our need for significance in a general sense, we grab for what seems to work quickly. Probably the most common quick fix is what we typically consider success. That is, relatively speaking, success is the way we fix our need for significance. Success can be defined in a number of ways. Probably the most popular way to view success is "fame and fortune." If we achieve position at work, home, or the community and we are compensated well for our contribution, we feel successful. This success brings a feeling of significance. This feeling is reinforced by society. Our society defines success as fame and fortune. The more we desire significance, the more we strive for success. The more we achieve success, the more significant we feel, thereby reducing our need. This balancing cycle is shown in Figure 1. Interestingly, it's the pattern we seem to all strive for. Early in life, success seems to bring the intended result – significance.

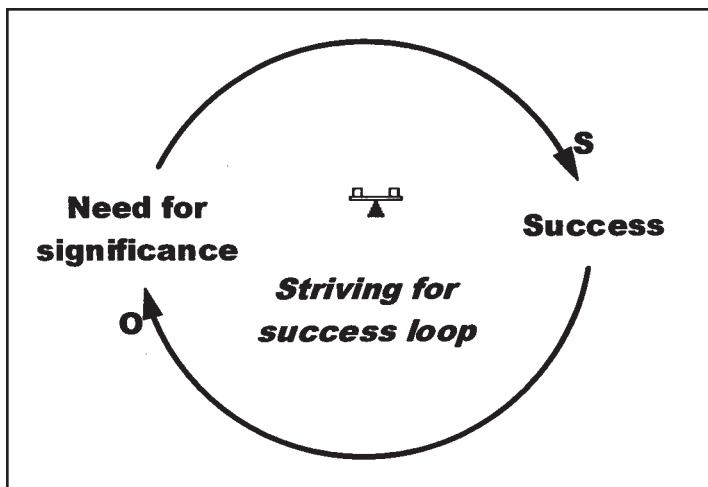


Figure 1. We can achieve significance through success—in the short term.

The need for significance and the use of success as a quick fix is especially true for knowledge workers, managers, and leaders. There are people who disdain striving for success in others and translate that disdain into a conscious effort not to strive for “success” in their own lives. An interesting question as we work through learning about significance is how helpful or unhelpful their approach might be.

Figure 1 is a causal map, a way of diagramming system structure commonly used in the field of system dynamics. In Figure 1, the arrows indicate causal influence. The “S” on the upper arrow stands for SAME, meaning that what happens at the head of the arrow (in terms of direction) is the same as what happens at the tail of the arrow, all else being equal. For example, in Figure 1 the greater our need for significance (the direction of increase), the more we strive for success. And, the less intensely we feel the need for significance (the direction of decrease), the less we strive for success. The “O” on the lower arrow stands for OPPOSITE, meaning that what happens at the head of the arrow (in terms of direction) is the opposite to what happens at the tail of the arrow, all else being equal. For example, in Figure 1 the greater our ability to achieve success, the less intensely we feel the need for significance. And, the