

How to Define and Measure Success on God's Terms

Experts had said it couldn't be done. The country wasn't ready for microfinance. The poor wouldn't repay loans. And the government was too corrupt.

But HOPE International, the organization I lead, saw the Democratic Republic of Congo as aligned with its mission to serve in challenging places.

Congo is known for its problems. Ranked the most difficult place in the world to do business for the past five years, it has hosted the most deadly war since World War II, waged in an effort to control vast natural resources. Called "the rape capital of the world," it's a country known for human trafficking and horrific violence against women.

And it's a place that humbled me.

Fast Track to Success

Shortly after joining our organization, I traveled to Kinshasa, where I met the local staff. They had a vision for their country. They saw potential in the hardworking Congolese men and women. And they told me they knew we could make a difference.

We wanted to dream big. At the time, only one in a thousand Congolese had access to a bank. No other faith-based organizations were there to help entrepreneurs start small businesses through access to training and small loans. So we conducted market surveys to understand the needs of our potential clients.

I was there for the program's launch and watched it grow from the ground up—and grow it did.

In August 2004, our team distributed its first loans. Over the next five years, we experienced dizzying growth. Clients were clamoring for our services. At one point we were adding 1,000 clients every month. By December 2008, we were serving almost 24,000 families in a country where everyone told us it could not be done.

I remember thinking, *It's really not that hard. We can actually do this!*

Beyond that, lives were being changed. Entrepreneurs were expanding their businesses. Parents shared how, through increased income, they were able to pay for school fees. And many were returning to the church as they experienced uncommon care and concern from committed staff.

As we grew in the Congo, all our summary indicators pointed to health and vitality. In just five years, we were a true success story. I presented our accomplishments at microfinance conferences. The World Bank honored our success with a Pro-Poor Innovation award.

It was as if we could hear God telling us, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you" (2 Sam. 7:3, NIV). We were making a difference. We had built an amazing program from nothing in one of the most challenging places in the world.

But we were only a few steps away from discovering fraud, closing branches, laying off staff and facing a humbling restart of the program.

Rude Awakening

After five years of success, we became painfully aware that we had failed to build a solid foundation.

Driven by a desire to have even greater impact, we (1) expanded beyond our capacity, (2) hadn't developed all the

necessary internal controls and (3) trusted individuals without appropriate checks and balances. We were not built to last. Closing branches and refocusing our efforts, we dismissed more than 100 staff.

It wasn't just about our ministry; it was also about me. I was devastated. I had found a huge piece of my personal and organizational identity in the success of this program. I had enjoyed being able to say to the naysayers, "Microfinance can succeed anywhere, even in the most difficult corners of the world. Just look at us!"

Going to Washington, D.C., and presenting on our work, I had created a PowerPoint presentation outlining 10 steps to implement microfinance in hard places. I previously had all of the answers.

Not so much anymore.

What happened? Over the next few years, we explored this question extensively, and what we learned has profoundly changed me. Key operational lessons were learned, but the primary danger wasn't the rapid growth, the failure to adequately plan or even program leadership.

The primary danger was the state of our hearts.

Gateway Sin

Jim Collins, best-selling author of *How the Mighty Fall*, says the first stage of a company's decline isn't an external factor but an internal attitude: hubris.

Though a secular writer, Collins recognizes that "pride goes before destruction," as the Bible warns in Proverbs. Though pride doesn't necessarily lead to an external blowout, church fathers like Augustine considered pride a precursor to other sins—in essence, pride is a gateway sin.

Turning our hearts away from the Creator, pride causes us to narcissistically look to ourselves for what is good, making us believe we are creators rather than the created and opening us up to a variety of other sins: wanting more of the biggest and brightest (greed), objectifying others for sexual pleasure (lust)—in other words, chasing good things in an inappropriate way.

With so many other scandals making headlines, pride seems like a minor issue. But pride is the root cause of so much evil. Ultimately, pride leads us to adopt the wrong definition of success.

And unfortunately, pride is not limited to the sphere of secular business. It's also found in congregations, in soup kitchens—and in ministries that try to help people work their way out of poverty in the Congo.

Ministry of the Big Deal

We had been caught up in a delusion, one that many fall into: As long as our graphs are up and to the right—as long as we have a growing ministry, a bigger congregation, larger amounts of giving and more good works—we must be on the right path. Right?

There's nothing wrong with a bigger ministry or congregation, but a fascination with such markers is toxic. Author Richard Foster says, "Make no mistake, the religion of the 'big deal' stands in opposition to the way of Christ."

In short: We'd adopted the wrong definition of success.

Just a few days ago, I was at a wedding in Georgia with my friend Kurt. On the way to the wedding was a giant billboard for a church. Front and center on the billboard was the smiling face of the pastor. Underneath his photo was the church's website—which happened to be the pastor's name with *.com* following it.

Kurt said to me, "I can virtually guarantee that this story will not have a happy ending."

A church with a billboard all about the pastor is a church that is in trouble. The pastor was sold and marketed—not Jesus. Our stories will unravel when we are the stars of the story.

The Weeping Prophet

To God, success is upside down. For example, we consider Jeremiah a successful prophet. But for 40 years, Jeremiah had no results. He had a message no one wanted to hear.

A social outcast and shunned by all, Jeremiah was instructed by God to avoid normal facets of life: weddings, funerals, parties. A bachelor, he couldn't marry or have kids (Jer. 16:2, 5-9). Foretelling God's judgment didn't make him very popular. Jeremiah said, "I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me" (20:7). Buddies from his hometown—and his own kin—plotted to kill him (11:18-23).

Imprisoned twice, one of the times he languished in a dried-out well, left to starve. Ultimately, he was rescued not by his own people but by a foreigner. Even the ruthless Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, gave him better treatment than did some of Judah's kings (20:1-2; 38-39). Jeremiah died a hostage in a foreign land, still preaching truth to people who couldn't stand him (42-43:7).

It would be difficult to call this a fruitful ministry.

And Jeremiah wasn't the only one who looked like a failure at the end of his life. Still leading an ungrateful and obstinate people, Moses died having never entered the land promised by God. Even Christ didn't look like a success—all Jesus had to show for His years of ministry was 11 cowering disciples.

Clearly God has a different measuring stick for success and a

different plan to change the world.

The Beginnings of Humility

Few conversations are more difficult than sharing with your most generous donors that your performance is woefully subpar. Following the restructuring of our program in Congo, that's what I had to do.

Throughout 2009, we'd been touting Forgotten Africa, a campaign to help expand our services in the most difficult regions of the continent. On paper, we looked like we had it all together and were poised to leverage our successful record of explosive growth in Congo. That had been our marketing pitch.

And then we had the fallout in Congo in late 2009. It wasn't just the staff with whom we had to share our failings—I knew we needed to share what happened with some of our key supporters as well. I had a pit in my stomach as I boarded a plane and headed to a luncheon with a group of our largest and most influential supporters in Texas.

I felt responsible, and I felt ashamed. I felt I had let everyone down: the hardworking entrepreneurs, the staff, the donors.

But after several hours, this group of supporters was amazingly gracious. They wanted to know how we had responded. They wanted to hear what we had learned and what we were doing differently as a result. And then they offered words of encouragement about some of their lowest times and how God used even their failures to teach them lifelong lessons.

They echoed something businessman Jim Amos shared: "All we get on the mountaintop is a good view. The real change comes through the hard work of the climb."

After our course correction in Congo, we are now rebuilding

slowly and painfully. Our mistakes created opportunities to learn and provided a perspective I hope I never forget: We need a strong foundation and a fanatical obsession with operational excellence, but most of all we need a spirit of humble dependence upon God.

We need a new definition of success.

Ambition God's Way

When we measure our success based solely on output and comparison to others, we are undoubtedly heading in the wrong direction. It's easy to equate the Lord's blessing with how many (or how few) people follow me on Twitter, know me by name and want me to speak at their event. Doing so, I adopt a skewed definition of success.

We do the same thing when we become enamored with churches with the highest growth rates and forget to examine the depth of character of the leaders. It's possible to build a mega-ministry and feel so good about "our success" that we also develop a mega-ego. It's almost impossible to overstate the importance of humility. As pastor Jon Tyson puts it, "When our influence exceeds our character, we are heading toward a disaster."

I see a very different example in the life of Jesus. Christ's life and ministry stood in stark contrast to spiritual self-promotion and obsession with numbers. Instead of clamoring for success, the Redeemer came to earth to serve and took the nature of a servant, not a superstar.

Jesus defined success as loving the Lord your God and loving your neighbor. The extent of our love—not numerical growth—matters most. One of Jesus' biggest criticisms of the religious leaders was that they adopted the wrong definition of success. They believed they were successful if they were given "the most important seats in the synagogues" and were recognized as esteemed teachers (Matt. 23:6-7).

No longer was their desire for Scripture about wanting to be close to God; instead, it had translated into desiring notoriety for themselves. Success had become an obsession, an idol, their object of worship.

Contrast this to those changed by Christ in the New Testament. You see that they weren't obsessed with searching for significance—with fame or fortune—but they were obsessed with embracing their identity in Christ. They called attention to their heritage—they were the sons and daughters of the King. They didn't seem to call much attention to themselves and continually diverted attention to their Savior.

Instead of comparing ourselves to others, let's recognize our identity in Christ. Then we can determine whether we're being faithful with what we have been given and let go of our spiritually dangerous preoccupation with worldly success.

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How does God's definition of success differ from the world's version? Go to to watch pastor Mark DeYmaz of Mosaic Church in Central Arkansas explain.