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# REDEFINING SUCCESS

STILL MAKING MISTAKES

# MORE WEALTH THAN I NEED AND LESS TIME THAN I WANT

## Redefining success—an interview with W. Brett Wilson

BY CRAIG DOWDEN

**T**he beginning of each year brings with it the opportunity to think about what we want to accomplish in the next 12 months. An overarching goal many of us set for ourselves is to be successful in the new year. However, one of the timeless questions we struggle with relates to how we define success.

W. Brett Wilson recently released his first book, *Redefining Success: Still Making Mistakes*, which covers his journey and his revelations through a very personal, and some would say, tragic story about the modern trappings of success. Wilson is a well-known Canadian, perhaps most notably through his time on CBC's *Dragon's Den* as the "Dragon with a heart." This reputation has been reinforced through his extensive charity work and involvement in the business community.

Yet, those reading his book or listening to him talk may be surprised to learn that Wilson is far from convinced

that his original definition of success was the best one.

### Q. WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO SHARE YOUR STORY ABOUT SUCCESS?

**WBW:** Four or five years ago I started speaking on my personal life journey with the Young Presidents Organization (YPO). Within YPO there is a cloak of confidentiality that allows you to dig a little deeper. So you share some things that you might not have otherwise shared because the idea is to maybe inspire people to look differently at their own lives. As I revealed some of the mistakes I made, it became clear that this messaging was resonating with YPOers. As I started to move to a broader stage, I started to be more transparent. I have never shared all, but I shared a lot and it went over with the audience; the transparency of the messaging. So, I undertook to start to put it together in writing.

The whole point of sharing at this deeper level started to resonate when

I was at the podium and I would speak to audiences and then get feedback. On one occasion, a guy wrote me an email that afternoon and said, "You've changed my life. I phoned my wife and apologized for the last 10 years of ignoring her."

I realized that if the book was coming, it better be consistent with the way that I approach sharing my story. I often say, if I get through to one person in an audience of 1,000, then my sharing was worth it.

### Q. WHAT DO YOU THINK IT IS ABOUT OUR CULTURE THAT MAKES US SO OBSESSED WITH DEFINING SUCCESS THROUGH WEALTH?

**WBW:** It is a little bit engrained in the context of capitalism. There was a great line that came out of the movie *Aristotle* many years ago. Jackie Kennedy was asking the question, "How much is enough?" and JFK took the cigar out of his mouth, put his hand on his big desk and looked at her and said "More! More is enough!"

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And you know, 20 to 25 years ago when I saw that, I thought what a cool answer. I look back on it now and think it is one of the most pathetic commentaries on relationships that you could ever encounter. Here was one of the most incredible women in the world basically having to beg her partner for his time and he was too focused on more.

So if you extend that conversation about how our western society tends to pursue things, it is not a surprise that we celebrate people who work long hours and we celebrate people who have made a ton of money. And

they become powerful. And the pursuit of power in itself has appeal. Absolute power may corrupt, but absolute power still has appeal.

And that's why the context of the book for me is about pushing people to really think hard about where they want to be in life and then set priorities that will help them get there. And there's no question that there's a time in your life where your career might take precedence over family, but if you do so to the complete detriment of family, the collateral damage will likely far exceed any benefit.

**Q. WHAT STRATEGY DO YOU USE TO ENSURE YOU MAINTAIN A GROUNDED PERSPECTIVE ON SUCCESS?**

**WBW:** I still run hard and work hard, but I play hard. I want to make sure that when I play hard, I am constantly focusing on how I can spend time with my family. In my own life, I ask myself "where do I want to be in the next three to five years?" I am 55. I only have a few five-year chunks left. So, I started to think about my life and my context. Then I realized, it is just as important to know where my key business partners wanted to be in three to five years. One of the first questions they ask is, "Do you mean in our personal lives or in work?" And the answer is, "Yes." It is really a blend.

**Q. HOW CAN WE CONVINCE BUSINESS LEADERS OF THE VALUE OF THIS PHILOSOPHY?**

**WBW:** Like most challenges, if they are not talked about, it's virtually impossible to deal with them. Whether it's an eating disorder or alcoholism, or workaholism, until you acknowledge its existence, you cannot possibly accept treatment. And that may be one of the reasons why the book is striking a chord with so many people who are either lost and not sure of where they want to go or they are so absorbed in the work world they live in, they are not seeing the balance of life. So, it all starts with awareness.

**Q. YOU SHARED SOME OF THE PERSONAL EXPERIENCES THAT LED TO YOUR AWARENESS-RAISING MOMENT. ARE THERE ANY QUESTIONS YOU WOULD URGE BUSINESS LEADERS TO CONSIDER IN ORDER TO HELP RAISE THAT AWARENESS?**

**WBW:** One of them is to stepping into the shoes of your own staff. Looking at that question: How would you define success? How much is enough?

There was a time at First Energy that we were pretty proud of the fact that we only ever had to fire one

partner. And others acknowledged quite quickly that we had lost quite a few, and I would say, "Yeah, but we burned them out." And that was okay. If I burned them out, they made a lot of money getting there. But you can't help but wonder if some of the better investment bankers might have had longer lives if there had been more balance and a more balanced pursuit of how much is enough.

**Q. SOUNDS LIKE THE CONCEPT OF THE SERIES UNDERCOVER BOSS.**

**WBW:** Yes. Very much so. I love that show for that very reason. It gives them a far greater appreciation of what's going on within their organization than any report from an employee could ever do.

**Q. HOW ABOUT FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS? WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO TO HELP THEM IN THEIR JOURNEY?**

**WBW:** There is little doubt in my mind that the essence of it is having that conversation first of all with yourself. Where do I want to be? What does my picture of success look like? And there is nothing wrong with it being multifaceted. We live in a society where it is okay to say I want to have a nice house. Think long and hard about what a nice house really means. If you want a big house on a hill, that's one way of approaching it. If you want your house around the corner from your kids, then that's another conversation. But have that conversation.

Then second, turn to those who are in your life. Parents, children, your spouse, and have the conversation. Where is it that we want to go? How do we define success as a family? In a parent-child relationship? I have done that. It's been very powerful.

**Q. IF YOU COULD GO BACK IN TIME, WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOURSELF AT THE BEGINNING OF YOUR OWN CAREER?**

**WBW:** A huge part of it was marital stress and challenge [that] could

have been dealt with differently. In particular, counselling and coaching in our personal lives. But, for whatever reason, we decided to just bury it and leave it as the unsaid elephant in the room.

And as my marriage failed, my ability and willingness, which were blended, to spend more time at the office heightened. And of course, the more time I spent at the office, the more challenging the relationships were at home. So, it was an avoidance strategy and one that is, frankly, not uncommon.

**Q. WHAT MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO BREAK OUT OF THAT CYCLE?**

**WBW:** There's the fear of conflict. And, at the same time, though, remember, our core fear is one of abandonment. Nobody wants to be alone. There's a belief that if you are alone, there is something wrong. And in my own personal journey, it's only

the last few years that I've come to appreciate that being alone and being lonely are two completely different things. I have actually become very comfortable with being alone, and realized that I am not lonely very often.

**Q. DO YOU THINK THIS FEAR IS WHERE THE OBSESSION OF WEALTH-PURSUIT COMES FROM?**

**WBW:** Absolutely. I remember having this conversation with someone when I was in my work-obsessed world, saying that, "I know my children will understand some day how much I love them, because I am working for them." It is a misguided perspective, because your children, when they leave, will go, "Yeah, my dad wasn't around much." They are not going to say, "Yeah, Dad really gave me a lot of money."

It's a sad trade-off. You know, I end up now with more wealth than I need and less time than I want. ●



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