



Big Potential

How Transforming the Pursuit of Success Raises Our Achievement, Happiness, and Well-Being

By Shawn Achor

12-minute read

Synopsis

Big Potential (2018) highlights how we can maximize our potential by working with others instead of competing against them. Chasing individual success only taps into a fraction of what we're capable of. But by connecting with other people, learning from them, and supporting each other, we can unlock hidden potential and reach new heights.

Who is it for?

- People looking to unleash their full potential
- Anyone who feels stuck in their life or career
- Leaders who want to bring out the best in people

About the author

Shawn Achor is a renowned expert on positive psychology. His research has been published by *WSJ*, the *New York Times*, and *Forbes*. He's worked with the Pentagon, the White House, and Fortune 100 companies, and his lectures have earned him distinguished teaching awards from Harvard University. Achor is also the author of the international bestseller *The Happiness Advantage*.

What's in it for me? Discover the five secrets to achieving bigger and better success!

It's hard to imagine a world in which we're not competing. After all, we've been taught that success is a matter of how well we perform as individuals, and we measure it by comparing ourselves to others. But in truth, this is only half the story. Yes, we can seek and achieve success on our own, but when we do this, we're playing in the shallow end of our potential.

To access deeper pools of potential, we need to join forces with other people. Connecting instead of competing allows us to learn from each other, combine resources and efforts, and support one another in the pursuit of our goals. As a result, we and the people around us succeed in more impressive ways than we could if we worked alone.

This is Big Potential, and these blinks break down the five secrets required for you to unlock it and reap the incredible benefits.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- what fireflies can teach us;
- the three types of people you need to succeed; and
- how celebrating brings Big Potential closer.

Perceiving success as a zero-sum game limits our potential. Helping others and collaborating with them greatly amplifies it.

"Top of the class," "first place," and "best." At school, on the sports field, and throughout our working careers, we're taught to aim for top-ranked positions. It's not enough to be good – we have to be better than everyone else. But what this implies is that there's only so much success to go around. As a result, we become competitive and focused on accomplishing things on our own.

But approaching success this way actually puts a cap on what we can achieve. It may seem counterintuitive, but if we want to maximize our potential, we shouldn't compete with those around us. Instead, we should help them succeed.

The key message here is: Perceiving success as a zero-sum game limits our potential. Helping others and collaborating with them greatly amplifies it.

By competing and relying on our individual skills, strengths, and other resources, we can only acquire limited success. Or, in the author's words, we're stuck in the realm of *Small Potential*. But when we help others succeed, our pool of available resources expands. And tapping into this wider pool makes it possible to

accomplish much more than what we're capable of alone.

This is *Big Potential*, and a study into the mating behavior of fireflies provides a glowing example of just how powerful it is. Research published in the journal *Science* revealed that when individual male fireflies light up randomly, there's a 3 percent chance that a female will respond. But when large groups of male fireflies light up together, that number shoots up to 82 percent!

Like these fireflies, when we collaborate, everyone benefits. And that's not all.

Achieving Big Potential isn't just a one-off. The more we help others succeed, the more resources they gain in the form of experiences, skills, and opportunities. We have access to these resources and can use them to become better and gain bigger success ourselves. This creates a positive feedback loop called a *Virtuous Cycle*, in which Big Potential compounds and becomes easier and easier to achieve.

So, how do we go about establishing a Virtuous Cycle?

The answer is by planting *SEEDS*. But there's no need for gardening tools; SEEDS is an acronym for the five steps to creating a Virtuous Cycle. We need to *SURROUND*, *EXPAND*, *ENHANCE*, *DEFEND*, and, finally, *SUSTAIN*. And in the following blinks, we'll learn exactly what each of these steps involves.

To reach new heights, surround yourself with positive and diverse influences.

Have you ever bounced on a trampoline? If the answer is yes, then you've probably experienced a *super bounce*. This happens when two or more people jump together. The impact of their combined weight launches them much higher than they would go if they jumped alone.

Big Potential is like a super bounce in that you can only reach it with other people. And so the first secret to achieving Big Potential is surrounding yourself with the right people.

The key message here is: To reach new heights, surround yourself with positive and diverse influences.

Having motivated, highly engaged, and creative people around you has a positive influence on your own attributes. Such people inspire you, provide support in difficult times, and generally help bring out the best in you. All of this has a multiplying effect on your potential.

In fact, this *positive peer pressure* is so beneficial that some companies are turning away from remote work. Thanks to new research, the likes of Google and IBM have realized that people collaborate more, work faster, and are more innovative when they're around others.

This is all the more impressive when you consider that IBM pioneered the idea of remote work!

However, it's not enough to simply surround yourself with positive people— you also have to ensure that there's diversity in your network.

If everyone around you has the same background or thinks just like you, you limit your growth, your exposure to new ideas, and, consequently, your potential. And diversity doesn't end with who's in your circle – the purpose they serve also matters. According to the author, you need three types of people in your network. *Pillars* for support when the going gets tough, *bridges* to connect you to new opportunities, and *extenders* who'll push you outside your comfort zone.

A good way to create this diverse network is by talking to new people often. You'll be surprised at the connections that can form after a simple "Hello." Once you've established these connections, make it a point to build reciprocal bonds. This means giving as much, and as often, as you take. Reciprocal relationships not only make you happier and more engaged, they're also strong enough to launch you towards Big Potential.

Recognize your power to lead and create positive change, and extend that power to others.

Imagine this, you've come up with some great ideas to improve the way things operate at work, and you're really excited about them. But very quickly, the innovation high fades and you start feeling hopeless. After all, you're not the boss, so how could you possibly change the status quo?

This idea that only those in charge can make a difference is all too common, and it stands in the way of Big Potential. For a group to achieve Big Potential, each person has to acknowledge their power to lead, regardless of their position in the hierarchy. And you can make this happen through the second secret to Big Potential – expanding power.

The key message here is: Recognize your power to lead and create positive change, and extend that power to others.

You can effect change without a title or authority, you just have to believe in your power and act on it. Think of it like this, a musician in an orchestra may not be in charge, but by speaking up and making suggestions to the conductor, he can influence the entire group's performance.

When you're using your leadership power, you can inspire those around you to do the same by developing an *Elevated Pitch*. This is a message to encourage leadership, and to make it effective, you need to consider what your audience cares about. For instance,

an outgoing teenager reluctant to attend college might be convinced to apply by the idea of campus activities and clubs.

Once everyone is inspired to lead, maintaining the momentum is vital. And this is where highlighting progress comes in. When people see that their efforts are paying off, they'll be motivated to continue leading and working toward change.

But here's a question: What if you or the people around you just can't see any room for leadership or Big Potential in your roles? Maybe your career isn't what or where you want it to be, or your supervisor discourages you at every turn.

The solution is to look for meaning and fulfillment in what you do, which we'll get more into later.

Anyone, from high-powered executives to janitors, can find meaning in their work, and this opens up the path to Big Potential. One way to start finding it is to spend just two minutes every day journaling about the meaningful moments you experienced at work. This trains your mind to recognize more of these moments and find ways to multiply them.

Enhance people with the right kind of praise and encourage others to provide more praise.

Earlier, we learned what happens when people think success is in limited supply. They compete and seek achievements only for themselves. Our view of praise is affected in a similar way. We believe that praise can only go to a few, so we seek it more often than we give. This is a mistake.

Praise engages people and motivates them, contributing to the Virtuous Cycle. The more praise someone receives, the more success they're inspired to achieve, creating further opportunities for praise. So, it's no surprise that the third secret to Big Potential is enhancing others through praise.

The key message here is: Enhance people with the right kind of praise and encourage others to provide more praise.

But what kind of praise is effective?

Well, the right kind of praise doesn't come at the expense of others. If we tell someone that they're "the best," it means someone else is "the worst" or simply not as good. This is comparison praise, and to avoid it, we should steer clear of superlatives like "smartest" or "best."

Praising the right way also means pushing people toward future achievements. When people hear that they can succeed, they become attached to that idea. And that attachment fuels them to strive for that success. So, don't wait for a win to offer praise – tell people they can win.

And don't only give praise to individuals. Every deserving person should be recognized. For example, a high performer has a support system of coworkers who contribute to her success. So praise should go not just to the star player, but to everyone who helps her along.

Now, to create an environment that's geared for Big Potential, we have to establish a Virtuous Cycle of praise. This requires encouraging more people to become praise providers.

In a study conducted with fellow researcher Michelle Gielan, the author discovered that 31 percent of people in workplaces are optimistic but not vocal about it. These people, dubbed the *Hidden 31*, can become great praise providers.

The author suggests identifying the Hidden 31 through conversations and surveys, and then leading by example by expressing praise whenever possible. Prompting the Hidden 31 to join in the praising of someone else, or suggesting they express their praise through a less intimidating method such as email will also encourage them to be vocal. Eventually, they'll feel more confident about voicing positive thoughts.

We need to defend against negativity, redirect it, and know when to walk away.

Did you know that negativity is like cigarette smoke? Just as we inhale second-hand smoke without lighting up ourselves, we also pick up other people's negative feelings.

This is a problem when pursuing Big Potential. Simply being exposed to negativity lowers motivation and makes us less confident about reaching our goals. Luckily, the fourth secret involves defending ourselves in the face of negativity.

The key message here is: We need to defend against negativity, redirect it, and know when to walk away.

Since we're talking defense, it makes sense to borrow tactics from war – a setting in which strong defenses are absolutely essential. In war, moats stall attackers for as long as possible, while strongholds help armies rebuild their strength.

We can create moats in our routines by avoiding sources of negativity like news, emails, and social media at certain times. For example, our moods are most vulnerable first thing in the morning and right before we sleep. Our mental strongholds can take the form of gratitude sessions to remind us of the positives, and mindfulness practice to prevent negative distractions.

Unfortunately, even with the best strongholds, negative feelings like stress sometimes get the better of us. When this happens, *Mental Aikido* is a useful tool. The martial art of Aikido teaches fighters to redirect their

opponents' blows. Likewise, we can redirect negative energy into something positive.

One way to do this is by finding meaning in a situation where negativity has crept in. We only stress about things that matter to us, and by asking ourselves, "why does this matter?" we can reconnect to the bigger picture. For instance, at the root of an author's anxiety over a deadline could be a desire to publish her work. Remembering this can encourage the author to keep going.

Another method of redirecting negative energy is reminding ourselves that we're not alone. When we realize that other people – whether colleagues or family members – are experiencing similar feelings, we can turn our attention to supporting them. This also strengthens our bonds.

But when defenses and redirection fail, and we can't shake negativity, it might be time for a break. Research shows that breaks actually improve our productivity, performance, and happiness.

And sometimes, a permanent break is necessary. If efforts to fight negativity just aren't working, it can be a signal to change course. Think about it: someone putting all their energy into a dead-end job is missing out on a chance to thrive elsewhere.

To sustain momentum, you should highlight meaning, visualize success, and celebrate every win.

In the previous blink, you discovered how to stop negativity from getting in the way of Big Potential. While you're blocking negativity, you also need to generate its opposite – positive energy.

This is because positive energy is what will keep you and those around you moving toward your goals. And this is the last part of the Big Potential strategy – sustaining momentum.

The key message here is: To sustain momentum, you should highlight meaning, visualize success, and celebrate every win.

Sustaining momentum requires that you constantly feed positive energy into the Virtuous Cycle. But this can be difficult to do when you're stressed or have to perform tasks that don't feel inspiring. When faced with these situations, the author suggests creating a "*Tour of Meaning*." This is an energizing story you write for yourself about your work.

Take a teacher, for example. He could describe his work as grading papers week in and week out, which is far from encouraging. But if he says he's educating future leaders, he taps into something more meaningful and, therefore, more motivating. So, when asked what you do or how you spend your days, you should tell a story that highlights meaning.

Another way to keep momentum up is through the power of visualization. When you picture something vividly in your mind's eye, it starts to feel more attainable, and this spurs you on. In other words, visions of future success and positive outcomes have the same effect as magnets; they pull you in their direction. And a great way to visualize a bright future is by writing about it in as much detail as possible.

When you finally achieve what you've been envisioning, you should celebrate. Not just because you've hit a milestone, but because celebrations, big and small, also fuel momentum. Moments of celebration remind you how much progress you've made and this encourages you to go for more.

And you shouldn't only celebrate progress or milestones. Celebrating people's strengths and efforts is an effective way of increasing momentum. The management at Toyota's North American parts center learned this when they launched a program to celebrate the strengths and successes of employees. That year, productivity increased by 6 percent, a great improvement compared to their usual annual increase of around 1 percent.

By using celebration, visualization, and meaning to sustain momentum, you're also sustaining the Virtuous Cycle that makes Big Potential possible.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

When we focus our efforts on connecting with other people and helping them do their best, we can achieve Big Potential, together. This is a five-step process. We first need to surround ourselves with people who bring out the best in us. Then, we should act on our power to make a change and expand that power to those around us. The next steps are enhancing others through praise, and defending against negative influences like stress. Lastly, we need to sustain momentum through meaning, positive visualization, and celebration.

Actionable advice:

Highlight what people do right.

The brain focuses on what we draw attention to, so when we point out something negative, in a way, we're reinforcing that behavior. This is why it's important to highlight positives as often as possible. Develop a daily habit of sending someone a message of appreciation or praise for something they've done right. Not only will the messages encourage excellence, but regularly thinking of praise-worthy behavior helps us uncover positives that might have gone unnoticed.

Got feedback?

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to remember@blinkist.com with *Big Potential* as the subject line and share your thoughts!

What to read next: *The Happiness Advantage*, by Shawn Achor

So, now you know that thinking of success as a zero-sum game is misguided. Why not challenge another common idea about success?

Many believe that in order to be happy, we first have to be successful, but *The Happiness Advantage* reveals that we've got this the wrong way round. Through research in positive psychology, Shawn Achor explains that happiness is actually a tool to help us reach success, and provides tips to increase our happiness and, consequently, our success. Head over to our blinks to *The Happiness Advantage* to find out more.