

News

The Five 'Universal Laws of Success'

by Peter Coy

November 13, 2018

- Scientist Albert-Laszlo Barabasi says the secret to getting ahead is to build a strong network.

By all rights, Douglas Prasher should have won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for his discovery of a glowing jellyfish protein that is extensively used today in biomedical research. The prize went to three other scientists. He heard about it on the radio one day in 2006 as he got ready for his job as a courtesy van driver for a Toyota dealership in Huntsville, Ala.

"Prasher was flooded with disappointment" after hearing the Nobel announcement, Albert-Laszlo Barabasi writes in a fascinating new book called *The Formula: The Universal Laws of Success*. "Not so much for missing out on the prize. More because he felt his obscurity was his own fault. It wasn't in his personality to thrive in the spotlight, and he wasn't comfortable reaching out to the people who might have helped him." He dropped out of academia after failing to get funding for his work—though not before selflessly sending his materials to two of the scientists who ended up sharing the Nobel.

The takeaway: If you want to get ahead in life, don't be like Douglas Prasher.

Barabasi himself would never be accused of hiding his candle under a bushel. The Hungarian immigrant directs the Center for Complex Network Research at Northeastern University and has an appointment at Harvard Medical School. Demonstrating his mastery of networking, he landed rave blurbs for the book from Black Swan author Nassim Nicholas Taleb and top scholars at Yale University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and elsewhere.

He concedes that it might seem brash to declare "universal laws of success" and not just, say, "guidelines" or "hints." But he says that the five laws were the inescapable findings from analysis of massive data sets related to sports, business, the arts, academia, and innovation. "Outright resisting them is about as futile as trying to fly by flapping our arms up and down," he writes.

Enough preamble, then. What are Barabasi's five laws?

1. Performance drives success, but when performance is immeasurable, networks determine success.

Tennis, for example, is all about performance, so having a good network won't help you win matches. But networks matter a lot in fields where there's no agreed-upon standard of excellence. Take art. A large, untitled painting of a skull, made with spray paint and oil stick,

recently sold for \$110.5 million. That had a lot to do with the name behind it: Jean-Michel Basquiat, who before his death gained entree into the art world through the likes of Andy Warhol and Keith Haring. "By carefully and aggressively building a series of meaningful connections," Barabasi writes, "Basquiat went from homeless teenager to A-list artist in under two years."

Al Diaz, the graffiti artist who once teamed up with Basquiat, is still largely unknown: the Douglas Prasher of graffiti. Life, in short, is unfair. But Barabasi isn't about bemoaning unfairness. He's about understanding who succeeds and why. So to continue with his laws:

2. Performance is bounded, but success is unbounded.

At the top of any field, there is little to no meaningful divergence in quality. All the top performers are pressing up against the limit of what's possible, whether it's sprinters, violinists, or bottles of wine. Nevertheless, the rewards that go with being judged No. 1 instead of a mere No. 2 are enormous and disproportionate. That's why it behooves you to do whatever you can not just to be the best, but to look the part. The pianist Lang Lang is known for his theatrical gesticulations at the keyboard. Turns out that's a good strategy. Both novices and experts did a better job of predicting the winners of a juried piano competition when they watched videos of the performances with the sound off—an indication that the jurors themselves had been swayed by appearances, not just the music.

3. Fitness x Previous Success = Future Success.

Fitness, for Barabasi, is roughly the same as quality. It's a necessary condition for success, but it's not sufficient. To achieve success in the future, you need to have had success in the past. Which, of course, is impossible if you're just starting out. One answer is to manufacture the impression of previous success. That explains why authors sometimes write rave reviews for their own books pseudonymously on Amazon.com. Sockpuppeting, as it's called, really works. People like things that others seem to like. Acquiring an aura of previous success is powerful, even in education. Teachers in a lower-middle-class school in San Francisco were falsely told that some of their first- and second-graders had excelled on a standardized test. The students who were randomly selected "did indeed excel spectacularly on the IQ test they took at the end

of the school year," writes Barabasi. The teachers expected brilliance, so they encouraged it, and the students responded.

4. While team success requires diversity and balance, a single individual will receive credit for the group's achievements.

Barabasi himself exemplifies this law. He is the face of network science at Northeastern University, even though he generously credits various graduate students and colleagues. This is also the law that Prasher fell victim to. Nobel Prizes can have no more than three recipients, no matter how many people contributed to the work. Sexism enters into the fourth law as well. When women co-author economics research papers with men, people assume the real work was done by the men. How do we know that? Because every team-authored paper to which a woman contributes lowers her chance of getting tenure. Dismayingly, "from a tenure perspective, if you're a female economist publishing with men, you might as well not publish at all," Barabasi writes.

5. Success can come at any time as long as we are persistent.

An uplifting law to end the book on. It's well known that old scientists are less likely to publish breakthrough research than young ones. But Barabasi's lab (in particular, a post-doc named Roberta Sinatra) discovered that this phenomenon is entirely a function of their publishing fewer papers. Any given paper by an older scientist is just as likely to be a breakthrough as any given paper by a younger scientist.

Lesson: Keep on trying! Barabasi cites chemist John Fenn, who was forced to take mandatory retirement from Yale but was happily taken in by Virginia Commonwealth University, where—past age 70—he developed a technique for measuring the masses of large molecules and proteins that garnered him a Nobel Prize.

Success is sometimes a zero-sum game. After all, there's room for only one at the top. There are pages of *The Universal Laws of Success* that have that zero-sum feel. But in his conclusion, Barabasi says the five laws can also be used to redress wrongs: "By kick-starting the success of the many deserving people around us. ... By noticing children hindered by their circumstances and giving them a nudge." Whatever your own inclination when it comes to getting ahead, it's good to know how the game is played.