

## What is Success?

“It was a huge success!”

What do you think when you hear this about an event or an internal initiative? Perhaps you think the success refers to many participants or raising a lot of money or changing minds, delivering a message, reaching new markets . . .

And that’s the challenge with “success” – you need to define it before you can measure it.

I recently read an article in the IABC’s *Communication World* that looked at how an internal communication initiative at one company garnered huge employee participation. The company assumed it was successful. Unfortunately, despite the participation (was it the great prizes?), the message that was to be delivered with the campaign went missing. In this case, big numbers did not equal big success.

Similarly, a blog post at [Convince & Convert](#) talks about how online audience numbers are overrated. In this instance, the numbers may not actually represent the real audience that you want to reach, which means they are not going to drive sales – or whatever else it is you want to accomplish.

Numbers are not the only key to defining success. If the goal is to change opinions or behaviours – or even votes – attendance or audience numbers can be a red herring.

And, even for fundraising events, a good turnout is only a good start.

To have a “huge success” – or even a modest one – you need first to define it. What goals will be satisfied with this event, initiative, project, etc. What will your organization achieve?

Some party organizers (let’s not call them planners) simply pick a time and date and then sit back to “watch it evolve *organically*.” They may be growing something, but it will be difficult to measure and will never reach a pre-defined idea of “success” except by serendipity. In any initiative, it’s nice to leave some breathing room for the organic – the unexpected – but if you want to accomplish a specific **outcome**, the garden will need tending.

The idea of tending or guiding, even ideas, is the focus of a recent book, by two fellows who know a bit about success. In *Brainsteering*, the brothers Coyne talk about limiting “brainstorming” to achieve more useful **outputs**.

And, understanding those two words – [outputs and outcomes](#) – will help you to better define your vision of success.

These two words can often be confused with one another, except by project managers! Basically, outputs are the activities, for example, how many workshops were held, while outcomes refers to what difference is made by the activities.

Success, however you define it is easier to achieve – and certainly to measure – when your tactics are well suited to your objectives.

Tactics make your programs come alive, they engage your stakeholders in meaningful ways. To do that, they need to fit with your organization's strategic goals. Even if you think you have a barn-burner of a "tactical idea," it needs to fit your objectives.

Be specific in your description of success. And remember the words of Beatle George Harrison, "*If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there.*"

Define it, measure it, follow it up.

What's your success?