

“Once I started reading, I couldn’t stop. The book is compelling, page by page. It opened up a whole new world for me.”

Derek J., head of finance at a media company

“The ABC of life has given me new perspectives and practical tools for interacting with not only my patients but also my friends, family, and colleagues. At my healthcare center, I now use the ABC as a best-practice guide for creating well-being and happiness for myself and my patients. Thank you, Marcus, for these amazing insights!”

Lisa B., healthcare professional

“This book has been an eye-opener for me. Marcus gave me a new perspective and fascinating insights on life. Now I know how to design my lifestyle for better health, more well-being, and success.”

Naomi M., managing partner at a consulting company

“The ABC of life has helped me to succeed at my workplace; better manage my personal relationships; and understand, monitor, and handle my emotions. Since first coming in contact with the ABC model, it has been in the back of my mind, effectively navigating me through my daily challenges.”

Peter F., marketing manager at a fast-moving consumer goods company

“This book is an awesome account of multiple science tracks translated into real life application. The ABC has become my guiding communication tool at home, at work, and with my friends. The tool has transformed my life. Thank you for sharing!”

Andrea G., head of human resources at an industrial company

“When I encountered the ABC of life, it immediately clicked. Finally I could understand people and—more importantly—myself and my children! For a single mother of three, the ABC represents the lighthouse guide for my daily routines, my life insurance in successfully managing my small ‘family enterprise’.”

Claudine K., single mother of three children

"I have been a teacher for over 30 years now. When I look at my students from an ABC perspective, I finally understand why they do what they do. As a result, I can better manage my feelings and steer students in the right directions. So in essence, for me, the ABC means a better life and a better education for my students."

Andrew C., high school teacher

"I have started to re-design my lifestyle according to the principles of the ABC of life. This book has fundamentally changed the way I look at life. I have already become a much happier and more energetic person now."

Patricia L., manager at an online platform

"Too bad the book is only available now. What a groundbreaking message! I wish I had known about the ABC during my professional life. It would have saved me from many failures. Now I understand what makes people tick. Looking at it from the bright side, the ABC gives me guidance on success and happiness for the rest of my life."

Francois G., retired senior executive

"I met Marcus a couple of years ago when he told me about the ABC of life. It all made sense to me in terms of my own performance as well as the team I played in at the time. The book has now become my bible in managing my day-to-day interactions with my family, my friends, and my coaches and teammates."

Connor W., professional football player

The ABC of Life

Success Has 3 Letters

Marcus B. Müller

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The “Why” and “What” of This Book

Success has three letters: A, B, and C. Please do not immediately judge my spelling skills. I did pretty well learning my ABC’s in primary school. At the time, my room was full of exciting spelling exercises such as “Annie Apple”, “Bouncing Ben”, and “Clever Cat”. But then life happened and I realized that the ABC I learned in primary school would not be enough to be successful in life. On my mission to explore the secrets of success, I discovered the ABC of life. My journey was an all-engaging rollercoaster of trial and error that took a substantial amount of time as well as emotional and physical resources. In this book, I want to inspire you to shortcut your own route to success. Before jumping right into it, let me briefly share the story of the book’s origin with you.

When I was 5 years old, all my parents’ friends as well as our extended family panicked whenever they heard that I would be joining my parents for a visit. They knew that I would be running around their house again opening all sorts of drawers and closets. Maybe I was hyperactive. Fortunately, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) was not high on the agenda of pediatrics at the time, so I got away with my behavior without the side effects of today’s common medical treatments. My parents were not so lucky: they lost quite a few friends and acquaintances due to my eccentric impulsiveness.

What I know today is that my behavior at the time was fueled by my insatiable curiosity. I was driven by the thrill of not knowing what was in that drawer—maybe there was a mouse or even a monster!—and the thrill of what further excitement would be waiting for me if I opened the closet door.

At age 14, I sticky-taped a world map above my bed. By that time, home and school had shaped my horizons. I believed that life was a battlefield. No pain, no gain. Good enough was never

good enough. Another thing had also become clear to me by then: I would never be a polished stone. Instead, my activities had started to increasingly irritate the people around me. I had chopped up my grandfather's garden hose with an axe to explore the impact of water pressure, and for my actions I was promptly reprimanded and punished by my grandfather. One summer, I built a spray gun to find out how driving behavior changed when neighbors driving by in front of our house were suddenly hit by a water jet through their open windows. For this, I was questioned and penalized by my parents and our neighbors. Another time, I ignited a series of firecrackers at a group of pensioners strolling in a nearby forest to observe the scare this would cause them. This earned me a questioning by the police and some social work at a local kindergarten.

The reason I had put the world map over my bed was that my insatiable curiosity had found a new purpose: my quest to become a success in life. Neither garden hose, spray gun, nor firecrackers had done the job—quite the opposite. So each and every evening when I went to bed, I looked up at the world map and fantasized where success was waiting for me in a corner of a side street—in London, perhaps, or New York, Rio, Tokyo.

Since then, I have visited most continents, many countries, and even more major cities. My curiosity prompted me to search for success as an engineer, a software developer, a management consultant, an investment banker, an ironman triathlete, and as a monk in a Buddhist monastery. Family, friends, and colleagues may have looked upon my life as a success. But from my perspective, I had not found success anywhere or in anything.

At age 42, I drove out of the underground parking lot of the Frankfurt bank I was working at, and it was at that moment that I decided this would be my last day in the finance industry. I wanted to search for success elsewhere for the rest of my life. Six months later, I started my PhD in organizational psychology at the University of the Sunshine Coast in Australia. It was there that I finally discovered success, after over four decades of searching. Fortunately, due to my curiosity, I had never stopped searching for

it. But to my surprise, there was nothing particularly magic about that place in Australia. Instead, my journey to success turned out to be a self-discovery. I had been carrying success and its building blocks around with me—inside of me—all my life. The secret code of success that unlocked my inner vault revealed itself to me when I first came in contact with the self-determination theory, which taught me that success had three letters: A, B, and C (for Autonomy, Belonging, and Competence).

Since then, I have been researching, practicing, teaching, and sharing what I have called “the ABC”. It has changed my own life and inspired others to become successful ABC practitioners. Groups of friends and colleagues from all spheres of life have invited me to introduce them to the ABC approach over a cup of coffee, a meal, or a workshop. Organizational psychology is a course I teach at my business school based on the ABC. Individual and corporate clients have been energized by the ABC. As ABC practitioners, they have benefitted from the three letters through personal and organizational success stories. Many of them—friends, colleagues, students, and clients—have repeatedly asked me to write a book on the ABC of life to make it available to a wider audience.

I have finally responded to their request with this book. In the chapters that follow, I will share the ingredients of the ABC of life with you. The book’s mission is to invite you to explore the ABC as an evolutionary approach to creating success in your own life as well as making a positive difference to the lives of others.

Part I (Chapters 1 through 4) will introduce you to three pillars of success and what propels them. I will show you how and why our feelings determine successful behavior. A closer look at the feelings of Autonomy, Belonging, and Competence will reveal the foundation of the ABC of life. You will discover that what makes the ABC so powerful is its grounding in our human nature.

Along the way, you will learn about and from scientists across the fields of social and evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, and economics. You will find out why the ABC of life almost did not make it out of the pits of scientific research

and into this book. I will show you how the results from research into the ABC in the 1970s had remained a mystery to conventional science for decades until more recent discoveries. I will share success and failure stories across life domains with you. Exploring how the ABC impacted an English soccer club, an investment bank, a hospital, and a coffee shop will give you an understanding of the practical side of the ABC of life. In further chapters, you will become familiar with the potentially devastating effects of a lack of ABC in people's lives. I will give you detailed insights into the role of ABC deficiency in failures spanning from a prominent Olympic Games disaster to a famous musician's suicide. You will also find out the crucial role that your brain's CEO and its bodyguard play in the success of your life.

In Part II (Chapters 5 through 9), the focus switches from the foundation of the ABC of life to its application in various life domains. An analysis of work environments sheds light on how the ABC can help create success for employees, teams, and organizations. There are substantial overlaps between the spheres of work and sports. The ABC will be showcased as a tool to enhance and sustain top performance in individuals and teams. For those of you who may not engage in physical exercise for performance but for well-being, another chapter will focus on health. Exploring how the ABC of life can be applied as a tool for the prevention and curing of illnesses, stress, and burnout will highlight the ABC's importance for individual and societal health. The Dalai Lama once said: "Happiness is the highest form of health", and this quote sets the agenda for a section on the relationship between the ABC and happiness. You will find out how the ABC can explain the pitfalls of episodic happiness, help achieve sustainable happiness, and clarify the difference between happiness and life satisfaction. In addition, you will discover the ABC's role in when and how money can buy happiness. Learning about the ABC as well as how to lead a happy life are just two aspects of what makes learning a central human survival mechanism. How we educate our children today determines how we will live tomorrow. The final section of Part II demonstrates

how the ABC of life can serve as a guide to creating success for students, teachers, parents, school administrators, politicians, and societies based on more effective learning environments.

On your journey through Part II, you will be guided by the findings and experiences of leading-edge psychology researchers and neuroscientists, business leaders and employees, professional and amateur athletes, health professionals and patients, a Buddhist nun, and children caged in classrooms.

In Part III (Chapter 10), I unveil how you can apply the ABC to your own life and create success for yourself and others by managing your ABC as well as contributing to the levels of others. The ABC of life can be taught, trained, and learned. Chapter 10 will tell you how to diagnose your levels of A, B, and C. I will also show you how to adapt new habits related to the ABC. You will find out how to (re-)design your life according to the ABC principles and become the director of your life movie instead of feeling victimized by circumstances. And you will learn how to use tools and interventions of give and take to become an ABC practitioner and doer!

The final part of the book represents an epilogue reflecting on how the ABC can help resolve the most challenging and complex puzzle of survival in the history of humankind: overcoming the exploitation and pollution of our planet to prevent our species' mass suicide. You will figure out why apocalyptic scenarios of doom and gloom as well as overcontrol and bans will be counterproductive to sustainable innovation. I will show you why the solution needs to start with thinking differently and how the ABC of life can be an effective tool in releasing the power of human creativity to ensure our survival.

In this book, I want to inspire you to pay more attention to your feelings as a source of success and failure in your life. If you do not understand what drives people, including yourself, you do not understand what drives success. Feelings are usually not openly discussed. The following chapters will provide insights into a structured approach to feelings that you can apply to fuel

yourself and others to achieve success and prevent failure. “ABC-ing” yourself and others is a skill that can be trained, taught, and learned. By practicing the ABC, you can design the very foundations of success in your life.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Marcus

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Part I

1. Learning from Pygmalion

Knowledge of what is possible is the beginning of success.

– George Santayana

In the fall of 1963, the principal of Oak Elementary School in the South San Francisco Unified School District read an article in the journal *American Scientist* that changed her life. In the article, the German-born Harvard professor Robert Rosenthal summarized close to a dozen laboratory studies he and his colleagues had conducted on what is known as experimenter expectancy effects.

Before starting an experiment, scientists develop a hypothesis of the expected outcomes. Experimenter expectancy describes the unintended effect of researchers treating their research participants in such a way that they influence them to behave in line with the hypothesis or the expected outcomes. In more general terms, the lab studies demonstrated that one person's expectations for the behavior of another could affect that other person's behavior. Rosenthal concluded his article by suggesting further research into potentially reproducing the effect in other disciplines such as healthcare, organizations, or schools.

Lenore Jacobson was electrified when reading about Rosenthal's findings. She was a dedicated school principal focused on creating the best possible learning environments for her students. Based on her extensive experience as a teacher, Jacobson had long had a suspicion that teachers' expectations of individual students' performance had an impact on teachers' behavior and, in turn, on students' behavior and performance. However, until then she had had no credible evidence to support her theory.

On November 18, 1963, Lenore Jacobson wrote a letter to Robert Rosenthal highlighting her interest in the field of teacher expectations. She ended the letter with the following line: "If you ever 'graduate' to classroom children, please let me know whether I can

be of assistance.” When Rosenthal contacted her, she understood that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a difference to school environments beyond Oak Elementary. Over the next two months, Jacobson and Rosenthal worked out the details of their collaboration. In January 1964, Rosenthal travelled from Boston to San Francisco to settle on a final design for the study.

All 320 children at Jacobson’s elementary school were given the non-verbal Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition, which was promoted to teachers as a test that could predict future intellectual performance. Oak Elementary had 18 classrooms, or three classrooms per grade: one for children with above-average ability, one for average ability, and one for below-average ability. A quarter of the students from each classroom—65 of the 255 children in total—were randomly selected as the experimental group. At the beginning of the school year, each classroom teacher was given the names of the 65 randomly chosen children, their scores of the Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition, and the feedback that the scores indicated that these 65 children would show extraordinary gains—that is, they would be “growth spurters” in intellectual performance over the coming eight months. However, in reality, the only difference between the experimental group of 65 and the control group of 255 children was in the minds of the teachers.

When the Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition was administered again at the end of the school year, the children in the experimental group had gained an astonishing 12.22 points in intellectual performance compared to an increase of 8.42 points for the children in the control group. The results confirmed the hypothesis of an expectancy effect in teacher-student settings. However, there were two surprises. First, the almost 50% gains in performance by the growth spurters over the control group was unexpectedly high. And second, when teachers were interviewed about their experiences with children over the school year, they reported that the 65 experimental children were better equipped for becoming successful in the future—in the perception of their teachers!

The Oak Elementary School research study provided the basis for what has become known as the Pygmalion effect, named after the sculptor in Greek mythology who fell in love with a statue he had created. The phenomenon has been replicated in hundreds of scientific studies since then across various life domains such as organizations (e.g., executives' expectations impacting employees' performance), healthcare (e.g., care providers' expectations impacting patients' compliance and recovery), sports (e.g., coaches' expectations impacting players' performance), and courtrooms (e.g., judges' expectations influencing jurors' decisions). While academic scholars around the world were busy reproducing the expectancy effect in various disciplines globally, Rosenthal focused on extending his research by examining another burning question. If the effect of interpersonal expectancy was so powerful, what were its drivers? In practical terms, was there a magic formula people could use in their everyday lives to create the conditions for their own success as well as the success of those around them?

The Pillars of Success

The prevailing wisdom suggests that success is based on a formula combining three main elements of behavior—goals, skills, and persistence. Successful people have clear goals. They own, acquire, and apply the skills needed to reach their goals. And finally, they show persistence in using their skills in the pursuit of their goals.

GOALS + SKILLS + PERSISTENCE → SUCCESS

Rosenthal's discovery adds a further dimension to the success formula. Interactions between people generate the *fuel* that drives successful behavior, namely goal setting, skill application, and persistence. A Ferrari sports car needs fuel to move forward and unleash its power. The fuller the gas tank, the longer the sports car