

# WHAT SUCCESS REALLY LOOKS LIKE

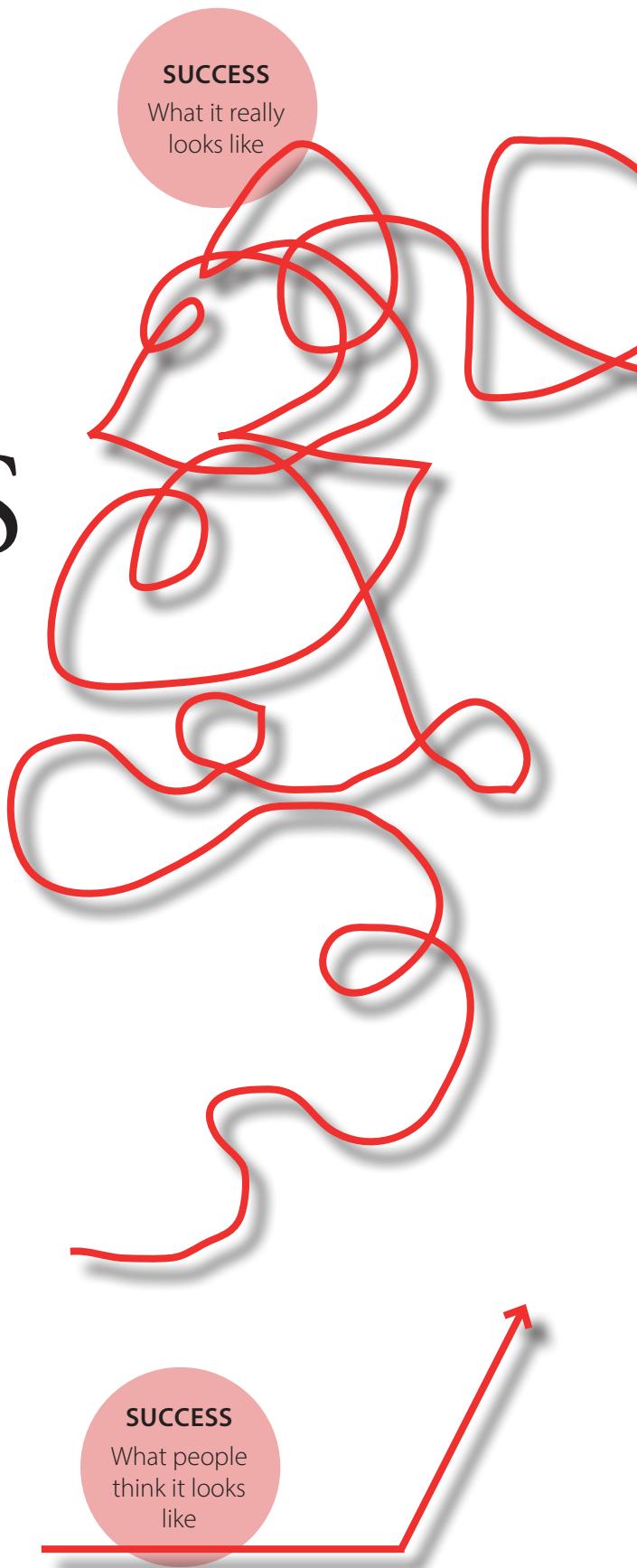
BRIGHT SPOTS AND BLOTS DEFINE A CAREER TRAJECTORY

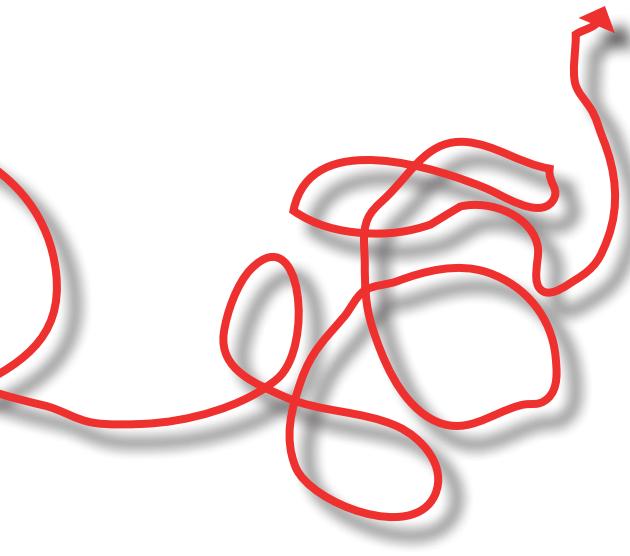
By Jennifer Abrams

The image of success not being a straight, upward arrow but a big, messy scribbled blob defines my career trajectory perfectly. My work has moved forward, pushed upward, and stretched further, but it hasn't been a smooth and easy path.

For nine years, I was a high school English teacher. Then Macbeth died in the last act every hour on the hour, and I needed to move on. I became a new teacher coach and a professional learning facilitator in one school district for 16 years, where I eventually found my consulting voice and moved from professional learning facilitator to author, consultant, and speaker.

In this last incarnation, I have reflected on the doodle





blob of career growth and new adventures and found there are both spots of bright ink and messy dark splotches and blots. Icks and yeas! Stings and ouches as well as audible bravas. The real trajectory. Here is a sample of my blots and bright spots.

**Blot:** Early on in my attempt at working with adults, I present to a group on the topic “Hard Conversations About Race.” My parents attend (the only time they both attend). I do it solo, a white woman, beyond uninformed about the deeper processes at work around my white privilege. My parents sit in the back. People give me feedback in many forms. I grow. Bright spot emerges out of some challenging feedback.

**Blot:** I work with teachers in a prison. I use my so-called management tool, a chime, to bring people back from small-group discussions.

After lunch, I return to find that someone in the group has taken my chime. I use a hand signal for the rest of the day. The chime is returned at the end of the afternoon. I learn to read my audience more closely. Again, a bright spot emerges out of a stinging learning. I continue to see that discomfort is a good thing.

**Blot:** I sit next to someone at a conference and am told point blank that, as I haven’t been one, I have no business teaching administrators. I spend a good part of over a year believing her. The experience leaves me scarred.

**Bright spot:** A veteran colleague and mentor shares with me a truth that provides me unbelievable sustenance as I move forward in my own writing. He tells me that when he and his co-author started writing, they were just making it up. I feel less of a fraud. I publish.

**Bright spot:** At a silent auction, I win a day with a



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Learning Forward consultant who graciously invites me into her home. The day of consulting consists of me asking her about how to become one. She shows me her office, in her basement, with piles and boxes and sticky notes. I am relieved to see the mess. I then spot some nail polish on her desk. She tells me she sometimes paints her nails while on a conference call to stay engaged. I breathe a big sigh. I think, “I can do this.”

**Bright spot:** I take a leave from my school district to see if I can make it as a consultant. I spend a year worrying about having to earn enough. I vote for Obama for many reasons, but one is so I will have health care. I take another big sigh of relief and then do more continued deep breathing as the political hot potato of health care is tossed about. Bright spot or blot? To be continued ...

**Blot:** After two years on leave, I spend significant time expressing my appreciation to my former school district and write what I consider to be a gracious resignation letter. I even quote Thoreau, who speaks to his need to “go on the deck of the world,” and I speak to my need to do the same. I get no response from Human Resources. In a few months, I hear from Benefits telling me my benefits will expire that summer. I realize that once you are gone, in some instances, you are really gone.

**Bright spot:** I am invited to present in Vietnam. I toast to myself solo at the rooftop bar of my hotel. I feel proud that I have trusted myself and am making it happen.

**Blot:** I facilitate my first day dizzy with jet lag, and the group rebels — in a polite way. I realize that the set-up of this experience hasn’t been clear to the group, and they share their anxieties and frustrations aloud, loudly with me. I am unprepared for their resistance on both a physical and emotional level.

**Bright spot:** I learn from the experience of an extremely resistant group. I make a commitment to be much more involved with schools as to how to roll out a new initiative.

**Blot:** As I start my consulting, I end up at hotel restaurants eating alone.

**Blot:** I find myself eating alone at hotel restaurants a lot.

**Bright spot:** I begin to introduce myself to other “alone folks” at the hotel bar. I learn an immense amount from people I would never have met if I had not been on the road. I learn how the Common Core does make someone career ready. I am appreciative of those who work in hazardous waste or with the FBI or in other challenging fields.

**Blot:** While facilitating a group, I find myself at odds

with an oppositional participant. He plays Solitaire openly on his iPad. I am crushed. This workshop is such important work. How can he not see this? I spend two weeks carrying around an insecurity that what I have put into the world is not worthy of another's consideration. I talk with my therapist. I meditate. Ugh. I feel dismissed.

**Bright spot:** Later in the year, again concerned my work wasn't a right fit with the culture of the group in which I was presenting, I find myself pouting in my hotel room. I get into an elevator with a big wheel in the profession. I am intimidated. We get off the elevator, and a woman comes up to ME to tell me what a great job I did in my session. She asks the big wheel if he will take a picture of us. Not accustomed to that role, he pauses as she hands him her camera. I grin widely. My life is forever altered.

**Blot/bright spot:** I present in Canada. It is a respectful group. Quiet. Too quiet. I worry the work doesn't resonate. I am driven home by a colleague who says the Twitterverse was on fire with tweets during the day. She also received texts as to

how good the day was going. I am delighted and surprised and puzzled all at once. I question what engagement looks like and begin to trust the work even more. I feel validated.

**Bright spot:** I spend a Saturday night reflecting on my career path. I am happy to spend a Saturday night doing so. I think of Paulo Coelho: "If you think adventure is dangerous, try routine. It's lethal." I celebrate, solo, in one of those hotel rooms I have mentioned above. Ah, what a squiggled blob of a successful career I have.

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### Make the most of every day

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professional learning that results in enhanced performance in the classroom, it has been a miserable failure. Not only has it not produced meaningful professional learning and not enhanced student learning, it has served to create dependency relationships and has infantilized teachers.

It has also done much to undermine the vital culture of relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2004) that must form the fabric of culture in high-quality schools. We desperately need a new perspective on teacher supervision. We would argue that, in order for teachers to become self-directed adult learners, they must engage in accurate and healthy self-assessment. Research from schools and the corporate sector strongly suggests that external evaluative feedback actually *inhibits* accurate self-assessment (Sanford, 1995).

### EXAMINE OUR PRACTICES

It's not the quantity of time at our disposal that is at issue. It is how wisely we use what is available. As a profession, we urgently need to examine our current practices critically and ruthlessly to determine which may be inefficient, which may waste time, and which may actually be counterproductive.

This will not be popular, and the irony is that some may perceive such an examination as a waste of time. However, as Bob Garmston and Bruce Wellman (2008) have written, "Any group that is too busy to reflect on how it is working together is a group that is too busy to improve."

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