

SUCCESS! how to learn it

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"All right. How many of you were encouraged by your families—really made to feel special?"

The small, warm, urgent woman standing at the front of the room reaches her hands out, her face alight with an expectant smile, welcoming any response at all from the twenty-one women who sit with crossed legs and closed, skeptical faces in front of her. Two of the twenty-one slowly raise their hands, and now her smile is one of rictus recognition, laced with warmth and promise. She is Barbara Sher, creator and trainer of Women's Success Teams, and she is here to undo precisely the kind of damage to ego and energy the new seminar members are reporting.

"How many of you got real help in deciding what you wanted to do, and then in following through on it?" Again, two none-too-vigorous hands go up—different ones, this time.

"How many were taught that the most important thing in the world was exploring your own talents and interests?"

One hand—out of twenty-one.

"How many of you were allowed to complain when the going got rough, and given

The Success Team . . . is everything your family should have been and probably wasn't.

real sympathy instead of being told to quit?" Two hands.

"How many of you grew up

surrounded by winners who were genuinely delighted when you won?"

Not one hand is raised, and the room ripples with uneasy laughter.

"Now," says Barbara. "Imagine how it would have been if you had had every one of those things—encouragement, help, sympathy, respect, and applause. Do you think you would be in a different place today? What would you be?"

"A psychologist."

"A mathematician."

"An anchorwoman."

"I'd have short stories published in all the top magazines in the country."

As one woman after another speaks up, the room fills with the sense of lost possibilities, forfeited dreams, checked intelligences. Most of all, it fills with surprises. For who would have had the imagination to see, in this gathering of pleasant, hesitant women—some hidden in comforting plumpness, some brusque, some barely speaking above a whisper—the submerged surgeons, scientists, newscasters and entrepreneurs? Barbara Sher would. She gathers all those secret, sacrificed ambitions into a bouquet and says, "I've got news for you. You can still have it. And you don't

have to wait until you're perfect." And she smiles into the hopeful, dubious faces of

twenty-one women who have come to learn how to shed the habits and attitudes of "don't-winners" (for according to her that's what most of us are, not "losers") and to set about defining and seizing their dreams, with the sound practicality of modern time-planning techniques and the support of a brand-new invention—the Team.

The Success Team, Barbara Sher's brainstorm, is everything your family should have been and probably wasn't: people to cheer you on, point up your strengths and applaud your successes; shoulders to cry on when you need to unload your frustrations before getting on with it; rescuers pledged to cull you every night when you're blocked or facing a deadline; a "resource bank" overflowing with ideas, skills, and contacts; and, in Barbara Sher's blunt phrase, "a bunch of affectionate ass-kickers." A team consists of seven or eight women, grouped together by random from the twenty to forty women who attend each one-week, three-night Women's Success Teams seminar. It is not a consciousness-raising rap group or a therapy group; its functions are in no way vague, self-indulgent or confessional, but refreshingly businesslike and specific. It is a team, committed to a joint goal: the achievement of every one of its members' individual goals.

After the week of the seminar—during which the participants are guided through exercises that teach them how to divine their own deepest desires and ambitions, to plan and schedule time, and to support each other's efforts—the teams are self-sustaining. They continue to meet weekly for as long as it takes to accomplish each team member's

aim. And the existing teams, which have given themselves such lively names as Aurora (my team), The Seven Wonders, Shazam!, Pandora's Box, The Get Set, and The Long Distance Runners, feel that they're likely to go on meeting long after their initial goals have been met—so nourishing and energizing have they found the experience of mutual support.

It is the teams that really distinguish this newest of the crop of '70s self-improvement programs from the rest. They carry Women's Success Teams beyond apparently similar time-management courses, creativity-training seminars and positive-thinking programs that furnish their participants with all sorts of good ideas and techniques, then turn them loose to struggle on—often fall flat on their faces—alone. "You can't win by yourself," Barbara Sher tells every seminar emphatically. "The emotional price is too high." These words sound strange, even vaguely sinful, to us, products of an individualistic society that taught us we *must* do it by ourselves—or stand convicted of shameful dependency and weak will. The blessed relief and synergistic stimulus of a team, then, comes as a revelation, and perhaps as a revolution—or at least an inspired quantum jump in our evolution toward a new, communitarian way of living, one that will no longer see the individual as a lonely, competitive unit, but as one distinctive branch of the human tree, sharing sustenance with every other part of it.

But there is more to the uniqueness of Women's Success Teams. Barbara Sher brings to the training of teams and team members her long ex-

toward our goals when we feel depressed—not only when we're euphoric.

Thus armed against the subtle sabotage of anxiety and depression, we set to work learning about flow charts and bar charts, breaking down major tasks into manageable substeps, day by day and week by week, always starting *tonight*. We uncover the hidden priorities in our "present patterns of time spent"—what Barbara calls "the nastiest part of the seminar." How much of our time is devoted to "avoidance patterns," like compulsively cleaning closets or raiding the refrigerator? How much goes to socializing with friends, how much to sleep, how much to just plain rest and relaxation? If the results appall, don't expect Women's Success Teams to chime in with your Puritan conscience and tell you what a bad girl you are. On the contrary, "We're much too hard on ourselves," Barbara asserts. "We need rest, but we say, 'I shouldn't need that.' We wouldn't treat a horse that way! We even need avoidance—but schedule it. Ninety per cent of your new time will come out of avoidance patterns." Time will come, too, from rearranging priorities, daring to delegate those chores least productive for you to other people, so that you can slate time for progress toward your goal.

The third meeting, Friday night, is when "we weld these teams into functioning units: work teams, support teams," Barbara stresses that "you don't have to love each other," and that our weekly team meetings must not degenerate into cozy gossip-and-confession sessions—even "Hard Times" is to be kept crisp and efficient. Our purpose is to bolster sagging resolve, to provide fresh infusions of energy, and above all to make each team member *take what she needs* to reach her goal. (As women, most of us are great, long-suffering givers. Our teams are to teach us how to *take*—to consider ourselves and our goals important enough to draw on the available time, intelligence and sympathy of others.)

Our purpose is also to be a "resource bank" for each other—a purpose brilliantly demonstrated by the sparks that fly and the connections that click in the seminar as a whole. A woman who dreams of going to Haiti, and needs a purpose to make it more than a vacation, meets another who needs craftspeople to manufacture a knitted novelty she's designed. A would-be film producer connects with a writer who wants to make a movie of her novel. A woman yearning for a gallery job finds a lady who just happens to know that the owners of a top New York gallery are looking for a manager. A middle-aged black woman brings in, with proud embarrassment, the first poem she's ever written—a poem for her team.

The first Women's Success Team—Barbara and six friends—launched itself into space just one year ago, in January 1976 (they're still meeting). The idea has clearly struck a chord in women across the country. Barbara has seminars scheduled at several eminent women's colleges,

in the New York suburbs, and in Washington, D.C., Buffalo, Chicago, Detroit, Texas, Las Vegas, Los Angeles and Honolulu. A newsletter full of success stories, imaginative gripes, and skills exchanges is in the works. Literary agents have approached Barbara; she'll write a book on

the principles of W.S.T. and the experiences and triumphs that have grown out of the teams. "I'm the proof of everything I'm saying!" Barbara told me.

But what she is proof of most of all is a simple truth she told my seminar: "You need to have your roots in your own soil. It's the richest soil you'll ever find anywhere." The Women's Success Teams manual puts it in slightly different words: "The only path you can expect to truly absorb you is your own path. It will generate all the creative energy you will ever need." Barbara is vibrating with that energy, that true tuning fork note, when she tells me at the seminar's end, "You know, at the age of eight I started a neighborhood newspaper so that everybody would know what everybody else was doing. Not long ago I met somebody from my street back then, and he told me—I'd forgotten—you were going to write a play, and we were all going to be in it. In college I remember I wanted to start a coffee shop, or some kind of business that would bring people together. I always thought, 'Give me any random bunch of people, put us in a room or on a desert island or a ship—what could come out of that? What could we do?'"

She looks around at the transformed, galvanized group of women—all talking, laughing, planning, exchanging information and phone numbers, believing that with each other's support they can do it all—and she smiles wonderingly and says, "Today it dawned on me: *this was my childhood dream.*"

Women's Success Teams manual.) "I was absolutely blocked."

"I didn't want to come tonight at all."

"I haven't got the guts."

"I believe I might really get there, but it makes me anxious. I started eating too much."

"I'm afraid I'll get high and then crash."

After each gripe Barbara leads the vigorous applause mixed with laughter, and when the session is over she says, "Did you notice? The energy in the room picked right up." We have just had our first experience of a technique Barbara calls "Hard Times," which our teams will use to release the sheer, ornery negativity that seeks, not helpful suggestions, but the opportunity to moan. Barbara translates for us what we, *really* saying: the dire chorus of our childhood programming ("We weren't raised to feel wonderful and protected—we were belittled, humiliated"), the masked voice of anger and fear at being challenged to *dare to dream*.

It comes as something of a shock that it's not failure we're afraid of—it's success! "People who are afraid of failing don't—ever. For us, failure is familiar and safe, like a net to fall in." One of the things we most fear about success, Barbara shows us, is being alone, for the majority of us came from families of "don't-winners" who rewarded failure with companionable consolation. "There's something disloyal about making it—leaving them behind. Our mothers stayed home! There's something comfortable about sitting down and saying, 'I didn't make it.' They say, 'I know, honey.' They don't want you to go away." We must learn to surround ourselves with winners, Barbara says—which doesn't mean leaving your old friends and family behind; it means daring to encourage them to win *with you*—to feel enriched, not threatened, by your and each other's triumphs. The team will serve as a model.

Other revelations follow: for instance, it is absolutely natural to get scared when the going gets good! "Anybody starts moving and changing, they get very nervous," says Barbara. "You're going to be anxious about anything you do that's worth doing. You shouldn't have to be brave and accomplish what you want to. Accomplishment is enough." Fear, then, so far from being the signal to quit, is what tells you you're on the right track. "Learn to love fear. Performers know this."

Correspondingly, Barbara urges us not to depend on our erratic "high" to waft us to victory. "Highs can harm you, you fool yourself into thinking you should feel like that all the time to function—that those at the top must always feel that way. Well, nobody does. Human nature ain't like that. We go up and down; that's just the way we are. It isn't about feeling good; it's about doing what has to be done." Already, during the week of the seminar, by keeping a brief journal of our daily moods and accomplishments, we are discovering with surprise that we can make substantial progress

perience in human relations and communications counseling, particularly her understanding of the origins of creative blocks and the pathways to full functioning. While neither the seminars nor the team meetings are in any sense therapy, Barbara does equip the teams with insights and techniques to cope with the fear, pain and anger that inevitably arise when one begins to confront the intimidating prospect of success.

The purpose of the first seminar evening is to search out your own goals and gifts, share them with your new teammates, endure their praise—one of the most excruciating and moving exercises is to turn your chair around and just *listen* while six virtual strangers describe what they see that's rich and beautiful and strong in you—and finally, to stop thinking of your real desires as "fantasies," sadly but safely unattainable. On my first evening, Basia, a softly feminine designer and craftswoman with a short square-cut page boy, got up and announced that *her* dream was to own a villa in the south of France and have all her friends come live with her in a sort of artists' community, and—here a note of comfortable regret entered her voice—that she would *never* achieve it, because it would take at least a million dollars. And anyway, her friends had their own lives and wouldn't come.

Barbara called her bluff. She got Basia up in front of the room with a Magic Marker and a big pad of paper, and within ten minutes an astonished Basia had a list of people to call, and the new realization that she could share the rental of a villa the very next summer—for a total cost to her of about \$1500. We had all witnessed a far-out dream materializing into a concrete and attainable plan, with its first steps to be accomplished not tomorrow, not next week, but *tonight*. Basia's dream may seem unusually far-fetched and fanciful, but we got the point: the same techniques can be applied to a coveted and seemingly unattainable job, to the complex process of starting your own business, or—as for one woman in my team—to building an amateur passion for photography gradually into a full-time, self-supporting career.

If anything, Barbara feels we are too timid in our imaginings. We have been discouraged from finding out what our own human energy can do if it is properly directed, organized, and supported by others. She encourages us to envision nothing less than our ideal day, in our ideal human and physical setting; on Wednesday night we will begin to learn practical methods of planning that ideal into reality.

The great surprise to me is that on Wednesday evening, two-thirds of the women who left high and excited on Monday night drag long faces into the room. Barbara surveys the glum prospect without surprise, nods briskly, and says, "Okay, now I want to hear *loud* applause for the best complaints. Let's have it."

"I couldn't do the homework." (Every-

one has been assigned exercises in the