

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Myths, culture and success in business: A case of US and Serbian cultures

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**This study attempted to determine success patterns of US business leaders and their relation to the cultural dimensions of American society and the American myth of success. The paper is based on an analysis of life stories of US business leaders of Serbian descent, and biographies and autobiographies of more than fifty non-Serb US business leaders of the 20th and 21st century. The analysis identified the structural elements and formula of success and presented them graphically. These stories of real success are compared with the American myths of success and American cultural characteristics as defined by Hofstede. The analysis resulted in the construction of the scheme of success that shows the process of success in American culture. The authors found correlation between the success patterns and dimensions of national cultures, comparing US and Serbian myths of success and analyzing whether the American scheme of success could be universal and applied to other countries, for example Serbia, a country with a completely different cultural characteristic, myths and success schemes. The paper also addresses the question of leadership using qualitative methodology compared to the standard use of quantitative methods in leadership studies.**

**Key words:** Success, scheme of success, myths of success, leadership.

## INTRODUCTION

Success is a concept that attracts attention and is desired by most people, although the meaning of this term is relative. While the term success is often identified with wealth and prosperity, its meaning can be different for different people and connected with achieving a certain goal. Wealth and prosperity usually come as a result of achieving a set of professional and personal goals. In this paper success is understood in the same way as it is used in the American myth of success that is, gaining wealth and climbing the social ladder from the lowest to the highest social level, which according to the myth of success is connected to spiritual development and personal growth.

Success as the result of an effort to achieve a specific goal was always of concern for individuals and communities. Myths of success, as myths in general, are a

product of a society's need to place common experience in a story that will preserve common memory and recollection, and with it, the group itself. The myth provides behavioral patterns and role models for individuals to follow in order to succeed. Anthropology of success is a newer subject of anthropology. It studies success as a human phenomenon and ties business success to a culture. Not by coincidence, its roots are in the study of contemporary American society and specifically the American myth of success. For many people from the "old continent" as well as other parts of the world, America is the "promised land" in which success can be achieved faster than in any other place in the world. Studies of the myth of success in American anthropology will most likely be followed by other countries which would be looking for their own myths and patterns of success.

Most of the research on success, other than in the area of anthropology, is done in management, or the studies of leadership in organizations. The research is lately

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directed on studying relations among characteristics of cultures and success while looking at economies of certain countries, companies and individuals (Fukuyama, GLOBE Study). Results of these studies contributed to viewing culture as a paradigm, or as a necessary angle for understanding not only social, but also economic processes and success as an integral part of those processes.

This paper contributes to these studies by bringing anthropology methodology into a leadership studies using qualitative method: text analysis and structural analysis of the life stories of Serbian American business leaders, and structural analyzes of the biographies and autobiographies of more than fifty other US business leaders. US business leaders of Serbian origin and their business success in US were interesting to explore because the US and Serbian cultures are totally opposite in terms of Hofstede's nations cultural characteristics having all four cultural dimension on the opposite side: individualist (US) versus collectivist (Serbia), risk avoidance high (Serbia) versus low (US), US masculine versus Serbian feminine culture, and high power distance in Serbia versus low US culture power distance characteristic.

## BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE: CULTURAL PATTERNS AND THE MYTH OF SUCCESS

Telling stories and creating myths are a universal part of mankind's mental programs. The content of stories or myths is determined by culture. Hofstede believes that people carry mental programs that are developed in family and in early childhood and strengthen through school and organizations. Mental programs contain components of national culture, or specific culture, in which we grew up, went to school, lived and worked (Hofstede, 1980, 1984, 2001; Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). Hofstede showed that values and beliefs of individuals in one culture have influence on the behaviors of individuals, groups and institutions in that culture and a degree in which the behavior is seen as legitimate, acceptable and effective. Results showed four fundamental dimensions of national culture that are present in every national community to a certain degree. Those four dimensions are related to values that differentiate cultures. *Power distance* talks about the extent to which the members of society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. *Uncertainty avoidance* means that members of society do not like uncertainty; there is a strong belief in experts and their knowledge and tendency to structure activities through a number of written rules. *Individualism* means that everyone is expected to look after themselves and their family first; employees in companies would work on their own tasks without expecting help from others or wanting their help. On the other end of spectrum where there is *collectivism*, it is expected that the group (collective) will resolve problems of employees.

*Masculinity* in a culture means that dominant cultural values are success, money and material values, while in *feminine* cultures dominant values are social such as caring for others and quality of life. Hofstede's and later other similar research, show significant differences amongst societies based on cultural dimensions (Hofstede et al., 2001).

### American myth of success

The basis of the American myth of success is self-realization (individualism), and masculinity. The key American belief in success has a long history. America has a drive for wealth and this drive is sometimes considered a weak point of American cultural heritage but sometimes the advantage. Comfort, status and security achieved through hard work are the basis of the American dream. The idea is that people who work hard would not be assigned a destiny of poverty but would be wealthy. This idea is supported by stories about people who achieved success on their own (self-made man), and the story about a poor boy who rose from rags to riches, thanks to his high personal moral code (Catano, 2001). This basic form of myth is somewhat modified in 20th century to include satisfying psychological needs through personal growth and self realization as the prerequisite for material wealth (Marsden, 1992).

America is considered to be a country of possibilities that gives chances to everyone. By displaying national flags, Americans show their appreciation for the country that gave them such opportunities: place on earth where even a person born in poverty with hard work could become a presidential candidate or a stock broker. It has happened here. Our mythology, argues Madonna Marsden, originates from something very real – our legal tradition, history and biographies of famous people. On the other hand, it would be a huge mistake to say that because it is based in reality, the American myth of success is true. It only takes to open a daily paper to realize that hard work does not always bring success (Marsden, 1992).

According to the same mythical pattern, with material wealth comes personal and spiritual growth. The main goal is not acquiring wealth, but personal development, vision and work for community. Once this process happens, material reward is likely to follow. The American myth of success is composed of following narrative elements: 1) the American system provides opportunities for development regardless of birth or circumstances; 2) hard work brings wealth and comfort; 3) rewards come to those who earn them; 4) those who are ambitious and driven; and 5) those that have a bit of luck (Marsden, 1992). In the first half of 20th century, the study (Miller, 1962) that looked into backgrounds of 120 successful managers, found only 3% to be poor immigrants or boys raised on a farm. The average successful businessman was white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant, raised in a city,

**Table 1.** Dimensions of national culture.

Country	Power distance	Uncertainty avoidance	Individualism	Masculinity
Serbia	86	92	25	43
USA	40	46	91	62

Source: Hofstede (1980): 67–69, Hofstede (2005): 43, 78, 121, 169.

educated and from a family with a good social standing and long-term interest for business. or, the family had a long tradition in a family business.

### Serbian myth of success

In societies in transition, such as Serbian, success is not socially defined and the ways to achieve it are not clear and are in transition as the society itself. Success is not discussed enough or it is viewed negatively, often connected to unclear ways of achieving business success and wealth. Serbia is a country on the crossroads between East and West, attractive to many conquerors and the country in which life was always full of uncertainties. Wealth gained in one generation, usually was not kept for another generation. The wealth came easily but it was gone easily due to frequent changes in government and politics. Wealth was not result of hard work and personal skills but luck, loose moral code, connections to important people and resourcefulness. Lately, success is connected with politics, connections and deeds that are illegal or shady (Pešić, 2006). Today's rich emerged by profiting from wars, black market, political privileges and immoral actions during the process of privatization (Milić et al., 2004).

In Serbia, contrary to the American myth of success, there are legends about sudden wealth as a consequence of finding a hidden treasure, winning a lottery, getting an inheritance or even gaining money through fraud (Kovačević, 2007). Serbian culture is characterized by collectivism and equality, so success, as an individual result and a way to stand out, is not looked at with approval. Success is seen with suspicion and honesty and integrity of rich people is doubted. In myths and legend, success is brought by destiny (born under the lucky star), luck (finding treasure, winning a lottery) or resourcefulness (ability to use a good opportunity or the weakness of others). A common fairytale is about children who are born on a day when destiny is in good mood and they will be lucky and successful versus the children born on a day when destiny is in a bad mood.

### American and Serbian cultural dimensions as the basis for the myths of success

The study intended to compare national dimensions of American society as developed country with successful

economy, and Serbia, small and poor Southeast Europe country. According to the Hofstede research, dimensions of American and Serbian are shown in Table 1.

"The purest" cultural dimensions of the American society are individualism (91) and masculinity (62), which are the essence of the American myth of success. Individualism is the cultural dimension that is mostly seen in United States, starting with first and then every other research. From fifty countries and three regions in original Hofstadter's research, USA was in first place with maximal 91 points (The former Yugoslavia, with Serbia as its part had 27 points). The second distinguished characteristic of the American society is masculinity. The basic characteristics of masculine societies are: orientation towards self, money and material things are more important than relationships, the emphasis is on what you do and not who you are, you live to work and not work to live, man have to be ambitious and determined and women can be, sympathy is for strong, fast and big is beautiful.

Characteristics of individualism and masculinity are particularly emphasized through the mythical pattern on success. In American myth of success, the hero is an individual, self made man. Culture's muscular character shows identification and sympathy towards strong. High individualism and masculinity are connected to low power distance and low uncertainty avoidance which encourage individualism, social mobility and high vertical mobility that is characteristic of the American society.

According to Hofstede's research Serbian cultural dimensions are the opposite of the American. Serbia is characterized with high *power distance*, high *uncertainty avoidance*, low *individualism* and relatively low *masculinity*. This is not a very good combination for achieving high individual and social goals. High power distance does not encourage development and success of the skilled and diligent but obedient and loyal to authorities. In societies with a high power distance nepotism and dependence on society's power centers can be found. This cultural dimension is part of a culture that accepts interpretations of reality and truth by some authority figure. This leads to manipulation of people's opinions and passive attitude towards research and cognition. High uncertainty avoidance is cultural characteristic showing that people are not willing to risk, and also not willing to enter into uncertain entrepreneurship endeavor, which is one of the conditions for achieving success. Serbia is the country that believes that people are prisoners of their nature and destiny

and the individual cannot change the world but accept it the way it is. Those beliefs are seen in many fairy tails and myths that talk about a person's inability to change their destiny. Collectivism as the opposite to individualism is a dimension that implies individual "assimilate" in society, which in society like Serbian leads to egalitarianism.

Those societies do not encourage motives for achievement, the main trigger for success in American society. The reason for this orientation is in the fact that destinies of people in the Balkans were not determined by their diligence but by circumstances. Frequent wars and foreign conquerors lead to more social connections for reasons of safety and surviving. Also connected with this is time orientation to present and past, expressed through belief that history repeats itself and that we should take everything we can from life now, because the future is uncertain.

Unfortunately those perceptions were confirmed in recent history (civil wars, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization bombarding). Finally, Serbian culture is characterized by low masculinity, the dimension that implies rationality and desire for money and acquiring material things. As opposed to masculinity, femininity is characterized by emotions and the tendency to fit in (social motives). Such a characteristic of the Serbian culture is not a prerequisite for success. Furthermore, Serbia is part of a region with a low degree of trust among people, that is, social capital (Fukuyama, 1995) which has negative consequences on the creation of a network of support necessary for great achievements (and success).

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Success of the Serbian Americans

Taking into consideration differences in cultural dimensions between two countries and different understanding of ways to achieve success our interest was to look into ways Americans of Serbian origin achieved success in USA. Six Serbian American business leaders' life stories (narratives) from the previous author's research (Draskovic, 2010) were qualitatively analyzed in order to determine patterns of thinking, repeated themes and beliefs. The authors were looking for factual and interpretative differences and similarities in the narratives. Each story was in addition analyzed structurally for elements of the American myth of success and structural plot elements of folktales and fairy-tails as defined by Prop (1982).

Themes found in every narrative and common elements were grouped, and compared with the structural elements of the American myth of success and other traditional narrative forms like folk-tails and fairy-tales. Finally, the biographies and autobiographies of more than 50 US business leaders were analyzed for the same structural elements found in Serbian American narratives and in the morphology of folktales and fairytales. By combining and grouping themes from Serbian American narratives, traditional narrative forms and biographies of American business leaders from mid 20<sup>th</sup> century to today, the same elements were found forming scheme of success (Draskovic, 2010).

## RESULTS

### Scheme of success

Eight themes were found to be common for both Serbian American leaders narratives and American leaders biographies and autobiographies: (1) Determination to confront the situation-action (2) Low start (3) Hard work (4) Certain Personality (5) Pioneer Undertaking (6) Circumstances (7) Crisis and (8) Help.

### **Determination to confront the situation and eventually leave their home:**

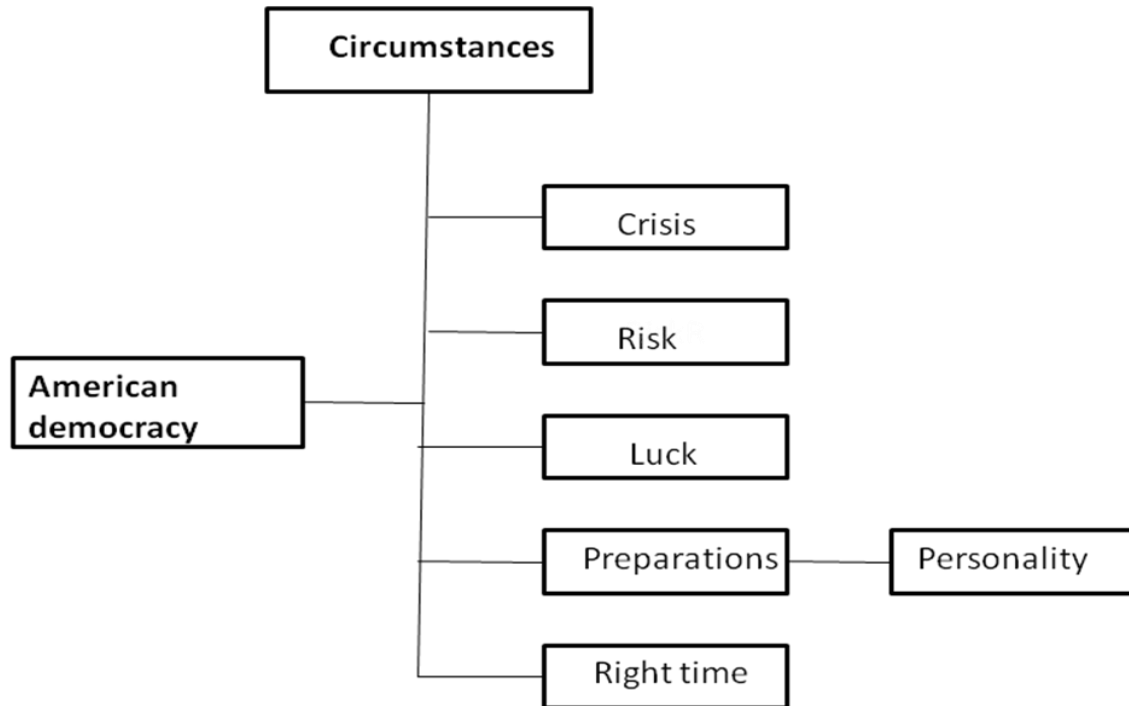
Is starting point for both Serbian Americans and American leaders. They are not satisfied with conditions of their life, are determined to confront negative situation, some even revolt against it and very often leave their homes in search of better future.

**Low start:** Starts from lowest social ladder repeated in narratives. As immigrants and newcomers, without good knowledge of the language they started doing physical labor to survive, starting off with minimum wage jobs such as delivering newspapers, construction work, mining, dish-washing or cleaning. They all continue to go to school and mostly have at least collage education. Low start is also seen in biographies and autobiographies of the US business leaders from 18th until beginning of 20th century. However from the 1930's newly rich do not start from the bottom. They come from good families, are educated and have at least collage education. The rich of IT era are brought up with privileges. Low start and the decision to change the situation is the starting point of the American myth of success. The basic way to overcome the situation is hard work.

**Hard work:** Is the main element of the success scheme of US business leaders. Serbian Americans start to work very early, practically from their childhood. They work from dusk to dawn, work hard and sacrifice personal and family life. The same was found in the US business leaders biographies like Clarence Vulu, DeBartolo and others who started working when they were ten, twelve, fifteen, just like their poor ancestors in 19th century.

**Personality:** Personality Is required according to both Serbian American leaders narratives and their US colleges biographies is the following: High ambitions and a need to prove oneself combined with perseverance, diligence and strong will. Hard and disciplined work is as important as good communication, honesty, team work, partnership, and respect for others and the community. It is also important to have vision and creativity.

There is almost identical personality structure in narratives of the American leaders of Serbian descent and in biographies of other US business leaders. The most represented are motivational characteristics and they are the initiators of success. There are three of



**Figure 1.** Impact of circumstances on success from the business leaders' narratives.

them namely ambition, strong wills persistence and perseverance. The bases for success are hard work and determination for action, both social characteristics. There is also always present moral characteristic such as honesty and moral righteousness. It can also be found together with other characteristics in the American myth of success, fairy tails, Horatio Elger's stories, popular literature, and is the part of every narrative and every biography of the US business leaders. As for abilities, in traditional narrative forms and biographies authors found vision, visionaries, visualization and imagination as parts of success as well as in narratives of Serbian leaders. In the latest they found creativity.

**Pioneer undertaking:** In the narrative of every US business leader of Serbian origin authors found a pioneer undertaking in some area of business, and also with every American who achieved great wealth. It is always an invention: new idea, breakthrough in a new market, new way of production or sales.

**Circumstances:** Circumstances are recognized to have role in success stories in contemporary America. Even since 1939, in biographies of the American business leaders one can find the idea that it was not only hard work that contributed to success but also luck or circumstances. It was Henry Ford who said that he succeeded because he was in the right place at the right time. (Mayo and Noria, 2005). The new wealthy people always appeared parallel with a new field/ area: automobile

industry, petroleum industry, information technology etc. Serbian American business leaders consider such business environment the basis for success and existence of a large number of successful and wealthy people in the USA. They believe they had a chance to be in certain circumstances that offered opportunities. All narratives consist of idea of the right timing and the element of luck. American democracy nurtures success, creates new fields of work and opportunities, according to the narratives of the US leaders of Serbian origin. But, they underline, it is up to an individual to recognize opportunities and use chances. Personality, curiosity, activism, motivation and ambition make the other part of this puzzle that need to fit together so the chances are recognized and taken advantage of. *You need to be prepared*, say successful Americans of Serbian descent when they interpret relation between success and luck. The circumstances that affect success are: crises and risks, recognizing chances, readiness (being prepared) to use opportunities related to personality and hard work and the right timing.

Figure 1 also suggests that there is no success without some sort of crisis and without risky activities. Personality is important not only to be ready and prepared for the right circumstances but also to overcome crisis, keep going, accept the risk and have a feel for the right timing.

**Crises:** Crises are not only part of the circumstances, but have their own impact on success. The individual narratives show several crises during the career, with at

**Table 2.** Helpers on the road to success.

Help	Friends
	Family
	Financial institutions
	Bosses, colleagues, teams
	Coach trainers

least one major crisis. Successful people are motivated by crisis, the crisis represents a challenge that influences change and helps them to advance in their career.

According to American Serbians, risks and crisis are the part of job and the part of success. In biographies of US business leaders authors also found ups and downs, and amongst them one was usually almost fatal. The big crisis was always a path to change and career advancement. In America, the children are thought success on example of Abraham Lincoln, who stated that the road to success is a walk from one defeat to another, without losing enthusiasm. The crisis is human and universal pattern of extracting the highest and greatest from people.

**Help:** Different kinds of help have been mentioned in narratives and biographies, and despite the American myth of a self-made man, no leader has made a fortune all by himself. He always had some help (Table 2).

So, the starting position as very low, mostly in an absolute sense, or relatively in relation to the later status. This position represents the lack of something, situation that needs to be changed. An action is connected with innovation of some sort (pioneer undertaking), inevitable crisis and risks. They initiate change, but for the change to happen two more elements are needed: hard work and help from others.

Finally, the whole process is followed by circumstances needed to climb to the next level. These are, first of all, social-economic system, positive environment that supports success (American democracy). Secondly, circumstances make time in which person acts, new areas of business, new paradigms, business trends, and environment. Thirdly, the circumstances depend on ability of the person and her readiness to recognize and take chances. This depends on person's readiness/alert, which depends on personality. Leaders are made ready (prepared for the moment when chances will arise) by their previous life, by their previous decisions, their actions, efforts, by the way they act in crisis and determination not to give up. With this attitude they affect circumstances, and found themselves in position to use circumstances to their benefit.

In the scheme of success emphasized personality traits (important for readiness and being alert) are motivational traits as strong will, persistence and perseverance. Only all the success scheme elements together bring a change that leads to the next level. This new state is not only a

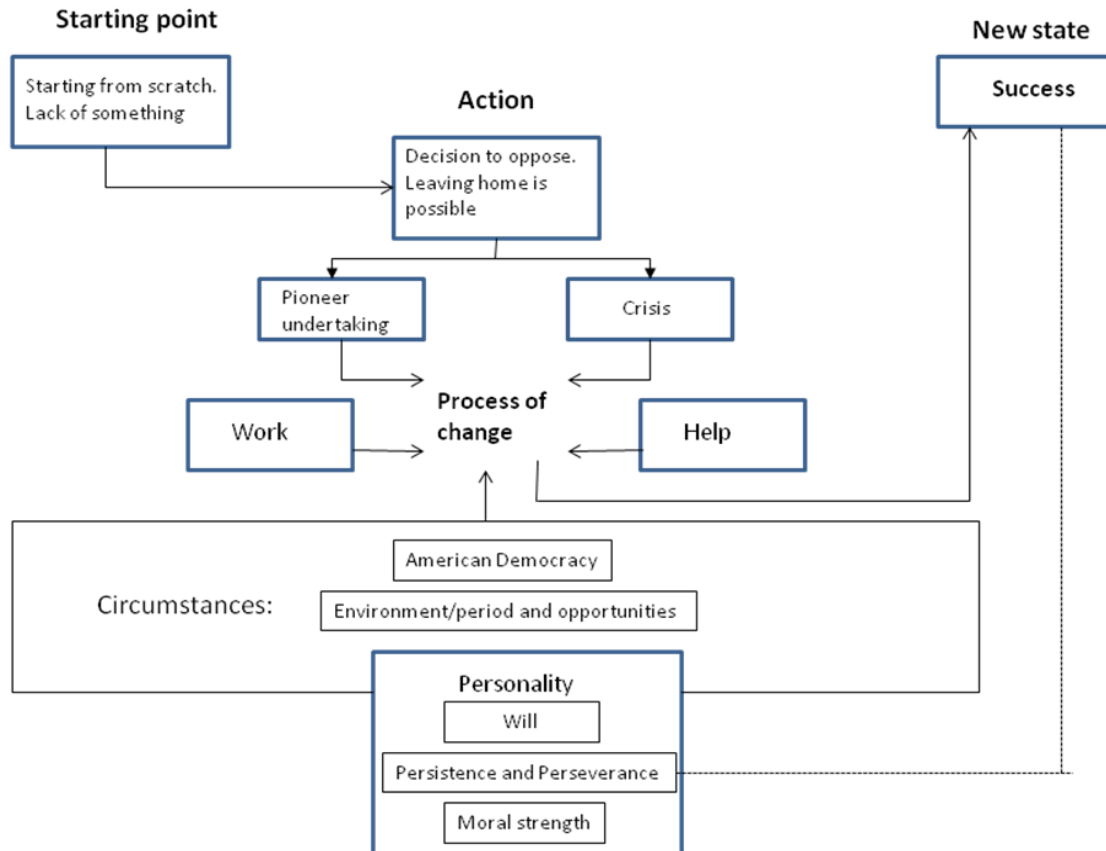
change in a material sense, but also in personal growth (Figure 2).

## Conclusion

The research has confirmed assumptions about the relation between the myth of success and cultural characteristics. The American myth of success is deeply rooted in characteristics of the American culture. Ability, diligence and courage all dominate in this myth. The American believes that an individual can start from any point in life and with hard work achieve great success and become wealthy was confirmed. This belief, which expresses very high vertical mobility of the American society, has roots in the American myth of success. The American myth created desire for material success as a common social value. The dominant myth of the American nation refers to business success and as such leads that nation towards success. Taking this into the consideration, it is not surprising that America has become a nation of progress, new possibilities, business and wealth. With its value system of openness and equality, the American society created mechanisms for generating ideas, work efforts, personal qualities, knowledge, and accomplishments as the basis for achieving individual, as well as national success. This is affirmed by the success scheme characteristic for this country's culture, regardless of the culture the individual comes from.

It has also been confirmed that using the success scheme characteristic for the American society by people from a different cultures (like Serbian) and with different assumptions about success could bring the same results. The success of the Serbian business people in America and the way they accomplished it, prove that their success scheme was different from the assumptions and believes attributed to success in Serbia, their country of origin. US business leaders originated from Serbia followed the scheme of the American road to success. This suggests that individuals can adapt to a different culture relatively fast, especially if the culture gives them chances to achieve their goals better and faster than in their homeland. However, our researches have suggested that it is conditioned by a specific personality structure. This refers primarily to personal motivation, strength, ability to part with assumptions and attitudes from childhood and courage in taking risks.

This research introduces new topics in leadership studies: Does success in a new culture require adapting behavior patterns and adopting values and myths of success of the new culture? It does suggest that success in a particular culture would have to take into account accepting and applying the scheme of success of that culture. More research is needed to test this proposition. Some future research should focus on comparing other countries and their business leaders' success with their myths of success, and scheme of success.



**Figure 2.** Process of achieving success-The scheme of success.

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