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Abstract

Ambition is the driving motive that propels us to reach beyond what is considered possible. Ambition fuels creativity, design thinking, and an entrepreneurial spirit, and is therefore a powerful leadership quality. Ambitious leaders are focused on performance because they continuously want to reach higher levels for themselves and their companies. Ambition, like so many other qualities, is multifaceted: it can be positive and negative in nature. When pushed too far, ambition can become a problem instead of an advantage. Consequently, it can lead to excessive workaholism, stress, health issues, and a toxic work environment due to intolerance, micromanagement, and excessive control, leading to dissatisfied coworkers. This chapter will discuss the importance of nurturing one's ambition, but will also underline the reasons why ambition needs to be examined frequently to prevent it from becoming a liability.

The Driving Force of Ambition

Ambition has been defined in numerous ways, yet, all definitions seem to boil down to the following:

Ambition is a strong desire to attain improvement, honor, or power. Ambition is revealed in our motivation to strive for a glorious future consisting of ongoing advancement, and leading to personal and professional progress (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012).

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Ambition can also be described as “the unique human energy that primes our efforts, and shapes our achievements” (Champy & Nohria, 2001, p. 4). Yet, even as the potential and purpose of ambition in our lives is readily admitted, there is more caution than enthusiasm about this topic among philosophers. Ambition has been linked to specific traits, such as thoroughness, extraversion, neuroticism, and mental ability (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). Our level of ambition determines how we handle these traits.

In addition, ambition is often influenced by three factors: our parents, our character, and our view of the world. People with ambitious parents, especially those with high levels of education and status, will usually turn out to be more ambitious. The reason for that is simple: it’s a reciprocal situation: the children are oftentimes inspired by their successful parents and aim to become just as or more successful than their parents (Bandura, 1999). Conversely, ambitious parents will also project their ambition onto their children and motivate them to aim high in life. Some sources go as far as genetics, and claim that ambitious children may have inherited their ambitious traits from their parents (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). The parental influence in regard to ambition is not limited to successful parents, however. There are many parents who failed to realize their dreams for whatever reason, and subsequently project them onto their children (Brummelman et al., 2013). This is especially the case when parents perceive their children as extensions of themselves. In those cases, which occur very frequently, the parents consider their children as a second chance to realize their dreams (Brummelman et al., 2013).

In regard to our character and worldview, it has been established that these factors propel us to from the inside to achieve high marks in life, such as a good education, a prestigious job, and a comfortable income (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). Under normal circumstances, these three factors are each other’s prerequisites anyway: good education paves the way for finding a high profile job, which usually also pays well. Ambitious people like to be looked up to. They work hard, but they thrive on the consequences of their hard work. They like to be addressed with superlatives such as “successful,” “powerful,” and “affluent.”

Negative and Positive Ambition

When discussing ambition in light of leadership, there are as many points of praise as there are points of caution. In this section, we will address one of each: positive ambition and negative ambition.

Positive Ambition

When a person aims to take a leadership position, there are various nonverbal factors that can reveal whether this person has positive or negative ambition. People with positive ambition are usually competent to do the job at hand, but not excessively eager to take on the leadership role. If and when they do so, they do it because

they are aware of the need to assist others and improve a situation. Positive ambition can be described as being competent, yet reluctantly embarking on a power position, and doing so mainly with the aim to attain communal progress (Larimer, Hannagan, & Smith, 2007). A good example of a leader who displayed positive ambition are Martin Luther King, who was not overly enthusiastic when he was requested to lead the civil rights movement, even though he knew someone had to do it. However, when he accepted his responsibility, he did a job that had no equivalence. In general, it has been established that leaders who demonstrate less enthusiasm in obtaining the power position are favored over those who come across as power hungry.

Negative Ambition

Whenever a leader displays an overly aggressive, self-serving and power-hungry, we have a case of negative ambition on our hands. A study done on positive and negative ambition found that negative ambition is predominantly associated with men because they have traditionally been groomed for and have accepted leadership positions. Negative ambition creates a sense of mistrust among followers, who are then less inclined to accept the leader because they fear that he or she will be very self-centered and controlling (Larimer et al., 2007). In general, followers are not fond of authoritative leaders. Leaders with negative ambition are power hungry and have a major sense of entitlement about special treatment and power. They place their personal interests above those of the group (Larimer et al., 2007). This may explain the change we have seen in recent years, where the emphasis is increasingly laid on less aggressive and more yielding, mellow leadership qualities. It may also explain the emphasis on the more feminine side of leadership in which empathy, compassion, and honesty prevail.

The distinction between positive and negative ambition shows us that the way a leader displays his or her ambition determines whether people will consider it positive or negative, and whether the ambitious person will therefore be cherished or ousted (Fig. 20.1).

Individual and Collective Ambition

Aside from its appearance within a person, ambition can also be classified as individual and collective ambition. In the case of individual ambition, as we shall see below, a person usually displays ambition in multiple settings and has adopted this quality as a second nature. In the case of collective ambition, a team spirit is involved.

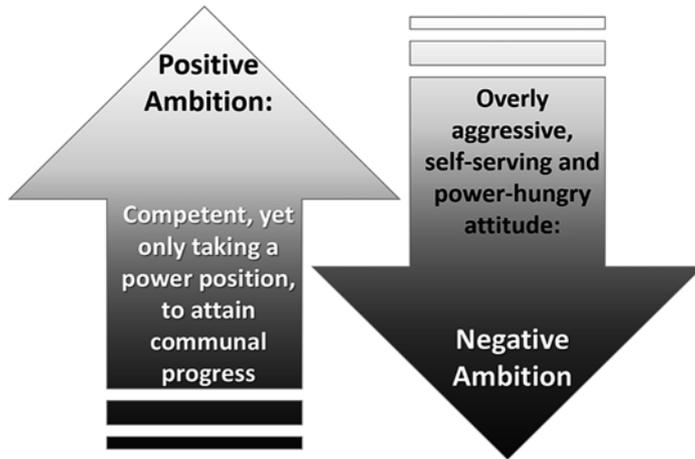


Fig. 20.1 Positive vs. negative ambition

Individual Ambition

Ambition is a valuable leadership quality because it is instrumental in climbing the career ladder or staying on top of it. Ambitious people see opportunities where others see challenges. Because of this, they continuously develop their skills and connections in order to transform these opportunities into reality. Ambitious people don't want to be followers for long. Their minds are always searching for ways to break through barriers and ceilings. They participate actively in projects, but do so with a mindset of inventiveness. In other words, they examine the practices and processes they are involved in, eager to find weaknesses they can improve, connections they can establish, or specific niches they can zoom into. They are passionate and take initiative. They often volunteer to do the less desired chores because they are aware of the fact that these often lead to great opportunities.

There are very few leaders—if any—that are not ambitious. Ambition may very well be the number one aspect that distinguishes leaders from followers. Ambition propels forward, always finding ways to improve current situations. On the other side of the spectrum, we have the complacent folks, who prefer to keep everything the way it is, and prefer not to wonder where that leaves them or their organization. They cling to their comfort zone, even though they may complain about it all the time, and dread any change. This has a lot to do with fear: distrust in the motives of those who champion the change, fear of losing their routine, and fear of not being able to do well in a changed situation.

Ambitious people have a number of mindsets and behaviors that are great guidelines to all of us who want to get ahead. Here are some:

1. *Improving old, established processes.* Ambitious people examine the established processes that frustrate them and create novel paths to enhance processes and

performance (Porter, 2015). Finding situations that need improvement is not difficult because they are all around us. It just requires an ambitious, entrepreneurial mindset, and a healthy dose of perseverance. Also, many new inventions were not created by people who were already rich. Rather, they came from people who got an idea from seeing or experiencing something on their path that they did not like and wondering how they could improve it.

2. *Outperforming competitors.* Even if there is no formal competition at stake, ambitious people will always try to outperform others. If they are entrepreneurs, they will frequently follow what their competitors do in order to improve on that. If they are employees, they will compare themselves to one or more colleagues who they look up to, and try to equal or outperform those persons.
3. *Narrowing the focus.* Somewhere along the way, ambitious people learn that their enthusiasm can lead them to take on too many opportunities, leading to mediocre performance or failure of all. As a result, they develop the habit of narrowing their focus by screening through the options, selecting the task they are most passionate about, and go for it.
4. *Finding suitable partners.* Another quality ambitious people learn through trials and tribulations is to share their tasks with people who complement their skills. This is usually a hard lesson because ambitious people prefer to keep all honors to themselves, since they fear that someone else might take advantage of their work, and they often also have big egos. Yet, sometimes it takes collaboration to make something a success. In business terms this is called “synergy,” which is the phenomenon of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

Collective Ambition

Ambition is not always an individual trait. It can very well surface as a team characteristic. Such a team can be large or small: a department or an entire organization. Collective ambition consists of a set of elements that create a sense of collaboration and result in heightened collective performance. These elements are purpose, vision, targets, strategies and priorities, brand promise (commitments to internal and external stakeholders), core values (guiding principles), and leadership (Ready & Truelove, 2011). Of these elements, purpose is most critical because it defines the organization’s very reason of existence and performance. Purpose lies at the core of the story around which the company builds its reasons for existing. The next five elements define the direction the company aims to follow, and the strategies that will lead to realizing this. The sixth and last element, leadership, pertains to the way leaders carry themselves and their workforce toward this common mindset (Ready & Truelove, 2011). Leaders, who examine the functioning of these elements on a regular basis, are well on their way to solidifying a community with an aligned goal.

A point of caution may be in place here: when considering ambition in a group setting, it should be noted that different members of the team will have different levels of ambition. This becomes particularly obvious in the case of transformational leadership. Transformational leaders expect their followers to exceed the call

of duty. Ambitious followers will thrive on that, as they are usually innovative and willing to take risks, but the less ambitious ones will consider the experience rather stressful, which can possibly lead to demoralization among these followers if not addressed properly (Holstad, Korek, Rigotti, & Mohr, 2014).

Ambition as a Key Leadership Skill

Regardless of frequent warnings about ambition and its influence in our lives, this skill brings its own set of advantages. A longitudinal study demonstrated that ambitious people usually don't consider their ambition as a problem and feel that they could control it if they wanted to. Ambitious people achieve more in the areas of education and professional performance: they hold higher degrees and better jobs, and thanks to that, they feel more satisfied with their lives (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). Even though there are other personality traits, abilities, and socio-economic factors that can influence the course of our life and career, ambition definitely has a strong impact. Let us now briefly look into three perception angles regarding ambition.

Preserving our Ambition

We all experience our share of setbacks in life, and no matter how ambitious we are; these setbacks can bring us down. We may feel defeated and even find our ambition shrink significantly. In such circumstances, it is easy to fall prey to a downward spiral of failures and depression (Pelusi, 2008). A good way to snap out of such a negative pattern is to take a critical look at our setbacks and wonder what we can learn from them.

Because ambitious people learn to focus strongly on their goals, they also run the chance of becoming frustrated if the goal does not get achieved. Having invested so much energy in a promising project that now has failed can make a person feel like a balloon that lost all its air (Pelusi, 2008). It's important to monitor these senses because they are the warning sign that giving up is around the corner. But winners don't quit, so such moments are critical to sit and refocus.

Ambition and Critical Thinking

Ambition is a major foundation for critical thinking because ambitious people always try to find ways to progress. In doing so, they have to develop mental strategies to move from one stage to another. In the process, they may encounter unforeseen obstacles, which will cause them to change their initial plans, and engage in the creative process of exploring alternatives. As has become clear from several examples in this chapter, critical and creative thinking are frequent companions in the lives of ambitious persons. A great example of how critical and creative thinking can fuel ambition is Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat of Humanity.

Coming from humble backgrounds, but eager to succeed in life, Fuller developed a plan to become affluent, and found a friend with similar aspirations while in college. He worked extremely hard and became a millionaire before he was 30 years old. However, he then realized that his hard work had taken a toll on his marriage, and as he was trying to save this precious bond with his family, he gave up his money and lived poor again with his family. Yet, his ambition was not gone. The only difference was that Fuller, now older and wiser, knew that any progress he would make from then on would have to be constructive and with inclusion of his loved ones. This ultimately led to his engagement in a housing program in Georgia, which later evolved into Habitat for Humanity, a nonprofit that build thousands of homes for the financially challenged in different countries and continents of the world.

When observing people around us who use their critical and creative thinking skills, we can see how they create ways for themselves to do things that so many others in similar positions are unable to do, from finding ways to obtain higher education in order to improve the quality of their lives to reinventing themselves and their careers, thus fulfilling their dreams in different ways as circumstances change.

Ambition, Motivation, and Goals

Ambition is not only a strong skill; it is also a strong motivator. In that capacity, ambition drives us to formulate and accomplish goals continuously. Ambitious people usually have some kind of extrinsic motivator in mind when they set their goals, from a promotion or a raise to earning a degree, acquiring higher status, and becoming more powerful. Yet, while they may have these extrinsic rewards in mind, their behavior is primarily fueled by their own, intrinsic motivation of accomplishment. They see the achievement of each goal as a personal victory and obtain a sense of self-actualization from it. Ambitious people set their own goals, determine how they will approach it, and how they will make it become reality.

Ambition: Some Points of Caution

Ambition is a dynamic skill, but dynamite can be hazardous if not handled properly. Ambition can run out of hand and make us its victims instead of its captains. Ambition can deliver us such a great boost of energy every time we accomplish something, that we may become addicts of this feeling, and lose our inner peace. Below are some points of caution to be considered in regard to ambition.

Lack of Focus

Ambition needs a focus; otherwise, it will only be a factor of exhaustion. Only when there is a clear goal, can ambition really be utilized optimally and constructively. A major longitudinal study in the UK among ambitious young people

yielded that those who had a clear focus were able to systematically and comfortably realize their dreams and become very successful in society. These focused ambitious youngsters obtained higher levels of education, landed better jobs, and earned higher incomes than those who lacked a clear focus (Sabates, Harris, & Staff, 2011). The above findings are not unique: decades ago, a team of sociologists also established that young people with concrete educational and professional ambition generally ended up with higher positions and better jobs (Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969).

Loss of Control

Ambition can become so overwhelming that it transforms into an all-consuming drive. As such, it has the ability to break us, physically and mentally, and keep us dissatisfied, no matter how much we accomplish. An interesting example is bestselling author Roxane Gay, who disclosed that, in spite of the many doors that now open for her, she gets no ultimate sense of fulfillment from the fame and admiration she experiences. She feels as if she always needs to prove herself better, and attributes that to her life experiences, in which early failures, discrimination, and being underestimated, made such a deep impression on her, that her ambition became so relentless over time, and has reached a point where she no longer feels any particular excitement when she achieves a new milestone.

From Strength to Weakness

When we review old literature, it becomes apparent that ambition does not hold the best reputation. It is often described as a destructive quality. Seneca (1806) once likened ambition to a gulf that swallows and buries everything, and does not lead to lasting happiness or contentment, because everything that is taken from others can be taken away again. Seneca discusses leaders such as Pompey, who was an insatiable conqueror, who simply could not stop his conquests, even after being regarded the greatest war hero of his times, and Julius Caesar, whose ambition also drove him to ongoing annexations in spite of already having established unmatched military power. Seneca warns that ambition can get us blinded, and that perceived glamor and greatness does not guarantee genuine, internal happiness.

Yet, ambition should not merely be seen as a weakness that leads to displeasure and discontentment, but should also be considered as a driving motive that can lead to positive outcomes if steered properly.

Psychosomatic Factors

It is important to monitor regularly where we stand with our ambition, and whether we are still enjoying it, or whether it has become our ruler. Monitoring our ambition is not just a wise and kind step toward ourselves, but also toward others.

Leaders who allow their ambition to take the overhand may set goals that are too high and thus cause tremendous stress onto themselves and the people they lead. As a result, their leadership may be experienced as abusive, even if these leaders are very charismatic (Pundt, 2014). Having the ability to elevate people to higher levels than they thought they were capable of reaching is great, but if the pressure on the leader and his or her followers gets too high, a number of unpleasant results may emerge, such as absenteeism due to excessive stress and anxiety, or even worse, lingering health problems such as high blood pressure, strokes, and heart attacks. There have been numerous cases in real life as well as in movies that have demonstrated this effect.

In the movie *Whiplash*, we can see a great example of abusive charisma displayed by a leader and how extreme transformational performance becomes disparaging to all people involved. The movie is about a highly respected but also immensely feared music teacher at a very prestigious college, who pushes his students beyond their limits to draw out the best of their talents. He thereby frequently belittles them in the most painful ways, and drives them to the point of obsession. While the teacher's ultimate intentions may be good, he achieves exactly the opposite: he breaks the spirit of his most talented student, which causes the student to give up on his dream. While the movie ends with a very hopeful scene, it is important to realize that too much of anything is unhealthy. This also goes for ambition. There is nothing as valuable as the process of cautiously monitoring in order to maintain a healthy balance instead of destroying everything.

Workaholism

A factor that should never be underestimated in regard to ambition is workaholism. Workaholism is often a consequence of ambition. The critical issue with workaholism is that it is so common and seemingly inevitable when climbing the career ladder. Yet, workaholism has a tendency to increase, consistently demanding more work focus and less relax and family time, thus resulting in psychosomatic symptoms, as mentioned earlier: strokes, heart attacks, nervous breakdowns, and more, as well as alienation from loved ones.

While workaholism can manifest itself everywhere, some jobs are infamous for the percentage workaholics they represent. One of those is the work of attorneys. Working with compelling cases in such an intellectually challenging profession takes a tremendous toll on those who are determined to succeed in their job. Breaking time barriers by staying awake for more than 24 h in a row often results in too much coffee, and sometimes too much other substances, in order to battle the need to sleep. Family functions, marriage, child soccer games, and leisurely activities decrease on the priority list, to the point that they become nonexistent on the ambitious performer's calendar. One ambitious achievement is followed by another. The sequence is unending and captivating. Feelings of guilt for prioritizing work above everything else dwindle as professional targets gain prominence. Realizing dreams seems to be the only focus, and others will just have to understand (Dik & Schaap, 2014). Power, status, and money are the magic words in these ambitious people's dictionaries. Work has become their identity. Everything else has turned into an insignificant blur.

One of the most fascinating aspects about ambitious-driven workaholism is that all the reasons given for it make great sense. Yet, so does the side-effect of depression. Research has yielded that about 20 % of all lawyers are depressed, which is significantly higher than most other professions. Similarly, it has been found that 20 % of lawyers are problem drinkers, which is double the number of the US average. In addition, there are higher divorce and suicide rates among this professional group (Dik & Schaap, 2014). This trend presents us with the concerning fact that, as the focus on status and affluence amplifies, the general degree of well-being declines. Many lawyers seem to develop a greater preference for extrinsic motivators, such as money, status symbols, and prominence in society. In doing so, they often neglect their psychological needs, which would have contributed to their happiness and contentment levels (Dik & Schaap, 2014).

What makes workaholism so complicated is the fact that it begins with a great sense of accomplishment, but gradually transforms into an addictive pattern that is just hard to break, not only because of the guilt a workaholic feels when not working, but maybe even more because of the rewards this trait yields to one's ambition. A workaholic is praised because he or she works harder than others, and therefore gets more done, so in comparison, this person tops colleagues easily. A workaholic usually harbors one or more of the following foundational factors: low self-esteem, a great need for accomplishment, coming from a family that promoted work addiction, working in a place where workaholism is valued or where competition is high, and feeling more secure at work than in other life areas (Dik & Schaap, 2014).

Workaholism has also been linked to narcissism. When narcissism is moderate, it is not necessarily a bad trait because it urges to achieve and thus receive praise, make progress, and become more confident at work. Yet, like all things in life, narcissism can also be driven to a point where it becomes excessive, fed by insatiable ambition, and translated into a continuous desire to earn rewards and recognition. This is where workaholism appears on the horizon because earning rewards and recognition requires greater effort than others (Andreassen, Ursin, Eriksen, & Pallesen, 2012).

Loss of Happiness

It seems that many of the earlier cited sources, as well as some that we have not cited yet, agree that ambition frequently comes at the price of diminished or entirely lost happiness. This may have already become apparent in the sections above: If you want to achieve something, but don't exactly know what because you have no focus, you just move without a purpose, and that will make you unhappy. If you do have determination and focus, but allow your ambition to run away with you, you get dragged from one achievement to another without any sense of real satisfaction, and this will make you unhappy. If you continue to chase status, power, and money, far beyond what you may have envisioned when you started, yet cannot stop, you have also become a victim of your ambition and lost touch with your happiness. If your health, or the health of those around you, is imperiled by your ambitious actions,

and you suffer from psychosomatic ailments, your happiness is also tremendously affected. If all you can think of is your work, and everything or everybody else has lost significance due to your ambitious quest, you may achieve great things, but your happiness will be lost.

It may not be the most comfortable thing to do, but ambitious people would definitely benefit from spending some quite time in contemplation about what they are after, thereby consciously questioning whether this goal will make them happy. Ambition—and this has been proven by research—often comes at the expense of close relationships (Stillman, 2013). So, while ambitious people may end up with better positions, incomes, and social status, they are not necessarily happier or more satisfied in life than their less ambitious peers. Besides, positions and status are temporary phenomena: they come and go. Invariably, someone else will take over your honorary spot when your energy starts fading, and finding yourself slipping down the same ladder that you once climbed is a pretty crushing feeling. Before giving in to an ambitious endeavor, it might be good to consider all possible consequences, and most importantly, the sacrifices this endeavor will demand on your happiness because short-term success is frequently followed by long-term regret (Stillman, 2013).

Professional Setbacks of Ambition

Ambition is overall a useful trait. We communicated that extensively in the previous chapter. Progress would be impossible without ambition because it is this very trait that converts dreams into reality, and thrusts us forward into new realms that were previously unheard or unthought-of.

In the first part of this chapter, we presented some of the troublesome aspects of ambition at a personal level: you can suffer from your ambition if you lack a focus, allow your ambition to take control over your life, allow it to disintegrate into a weakness rather than a strength, suffer from psychosomatic symptoms due to excessive ambition, become an incurable workaholic, and experience loss of your happiness. These are some of the personal setbacks you can experience if you don't safeguard your ambition. However, others may suffer from your ambition as well. If you work or live with other people, they can get seriously affected by the side-effects of your excessive ambitious nature.

Intolerance

Ambitious people often display a low tolerance for the people around them. They work harder than others, and if they are in charge, they will most likely expect the same from those around them. This can lead to intolerance and impatience when they encounter others that don't take the tasks as seriously as they do. As a result, they may distance themselves from these lower performers, maneuvering them into an "out-group" position, whereas those that match or follow their ambitious targets

are elevated into the “in-group.” Out-group and in-group phenomena, while not a desirable trend in light of fairness, are rather common in workplaces because most leaders simply gravitate more to some people and less to others. Depending on the leader in charge, the parameters for in-group and out-group membership are set. The in-group members are more trusted, more involved in important tasks and decisions, and more likely to progress in the organization due to their affiliation with the leader. The out-group members experience exactly the opposite: they are only informed about the most important facts, not involved in critical processes, and fairly immobile in their position.

In the case of an ambitious leader, the less ambitious employees will most likely be part of the out-group, unless they harbor a special knowledge, connection, or other quality that the leader may consider critical in achieving his or her goals. In those specific cases, a less ambitious employee will be allowed in the in-group for as long as he or she can be instrumental to the leader’s focus. Once that has been achieved, there is a good chance that the less ambitious worker will be heaved to the wayside, unless he or she is politically savvy and cunningly manipulates the key to the leader’s interest.

Micromanagement and Excessive Control

Because ambitious leaders want to secure progress, and do so in a swift and effective way, they may have a tendency to micromanage their coworkers. The deep-rooted motive hereby is their discomfort and mistrust in the capacities of others to do the job as excellent as they do. While they realize that they cannot possibly do everything alone, they will delegate tasks and responsibilities, but look over other’s shoulders as hard and as often as they can, to monitor the process in the way they perceive as the correct one. In doing so, they curtail coworker’s creativity and self-esteem and increase dissatisfaction within these coworkers.

A good piece of advice to ambitious leaders is therefore to allow people to be the best they can be, which is only achieved if they feel as if they have ownership over their part of the task and are allowed to apply their insights. Ambitious leaders should consider this smart strategy of allowing others to be great as well and show confidence rather than contempt for those they work with.¹

Increased Dissatisfaction

Because we are all different, driven by a multitude of motives, insights, beliefs, and values, we see the world and what we expect from it differently as well. Working with an excessively ambitious leader can have a very stressful, sometimes downright dissatisfying effect on coworkers, especially if they don’t share the

¹ Champy, J., & Nohria, N. (2000). Ambition: Root of achievement. *Executive Excellence*, 17(3), 5–6.

degree of affiliation with or passion about the goal that the leader aims to achieve. Some coworkers may consider the goal senseless or threatening to their job-security, and may try to contest it where possible. Others may agree with the leader's target but not with his or her path toward achieving the target. They may feel that the leader moves too fast or uses a strategy that is less desirable in their mind. Yet others may be indifferent to the leader's purpose, as they either just see their job as a source of income, or have been contrived to the out-group.

There will probably be a cross section of these characters and considerations in most common work environments. When the leader is highly ambitious, this may be translated as self-centered or self-serving, and prompt gives rise to mistrust and suspicion from the workforce. Highly ambitious leaders should keep in mind that a majority of working people harbors some ambition, but most of the time by far not amounting to the degree of ambition the leader holds. When these people are therefore confronted with a highly ambitious leader, they become insecure and fearful of disruptions to their comfort zone. As a result, they may become very active, but not in the way the ambitious leader would like. Their aim will be to oust this ambitious leader and look for a more moderate lead-figure.

Damaged Trust and Reputation

The past decades have presented us plenty of examples of corporate leaders who were once revered, but allowed their ambition to drive them to a point where they lost sight of moral and legal boundaries. Winning becomes the only thing that matters, and it has to happen at any cost. Major corporations such as Enron, Tyco, and WorldCom have experienced their downfall due to excessively ambitious leaders who were once admired, but somewhere lost sight of the limits of responsible behavior. Yet, these are not the only areas where the fascination of winning has led to damaged trust and reputation. The desire to become a star has penetrated so deeply in the psyche of some people, that they overstep the boundaries of honorable behavior, only to continue feeding their ambition. In a short article that focused on the downside of ambition, Robert Samuelson presents examples of Bill Belichick, Marion Jones, and William Lerach, all three acclaimed professionals, who went just too far with their ambition. Belichick, who was the coach of the New England Patriots, betrayed National Football League rules by videotaping his opponents' defensive signals, even though his team had won many times before without these dishonest practices.² Marion Jones, a successful Olympic runner, had to return five medals, won at the 2000 Australian Olympics, after it was discovered that she had used performance-enhancing drugs.³ Trial lawyer William Lerach engaged in illegal practices by hiring plaintiffs who served as fronts in lawsuits filed against

²Samuelson, R. J. (2007, October 22). The downside of ambition: breaking the rules to succeed. *Fort Worth Business Press*. p. 38.

³Ibid.

corporations.⁴ These three people paid dearly for their professional ambition, and did not only lose the trust of those who looked up to them, but also had to pay large sums of money, and in two of the three cases, even spent time in jail.

Nonetheless, ambition remains a phenomenon that speaks to the imagination of many people, especially in a country such as the United States. The fascination with winning can be seen every night on television in a wide variety of shows, such as “America’s Next Top Model,” and “Dancing with the Stars.” What we should realize when considering the great success rate of such programs is the fact that the subject of the show is actually of secondary importance. The biggest thrill is the process of winning and losing: that eternal tension and the identification we build with some of those on the screen. A survey, held by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, which focused on what mattered in making progress in life, yielded that the most important factor listed was “ambition” (43%), followed by “hard work” (38%) and “good education” (36%).⁵ As mentioned earlier in this and the previous chapter, however, ambition is a powerful, yet dangerous vehicle that can lead to major victories, but also to tragedy. The greater one’s ambition becomes, the higher one’s self-absorption, and this happens at the expense of everything else in life.⁶

Case Study 20.1: Abe Lincoln’s Staircase of Ambition

Note: Abraham Lincoln has earned a special place in this book by being the only person to whom a case study is attributed in both the “Soft Skill” and the “Hard Skill” sections. Each of the cases portrays the 16th US President in a different light, thus preventing too much information overlap.

Abraham Lincoln is praised by many as one of the best presidents America ever had. He was born in Kentucky, but spent most of his childhood in Indiana. His path toward becoming the 16th president of the nation was not exactly a bed of roses. Growing up in the early 1800s meant that formal education was not considered a necessity, and young Abe had to educate himself. His formal schooling lasted less than a year, but Lincoln was determined to learn all he could. He devoured every book he could find. His father was an illiterate farmer and carpenter, and his mother, equally uneducated, died when he was only 9 years old. The circumstances were not promising, and there was no one who was eager to polish the hidden gem in young Abraham. He had to do it with his ambition, and he had plenty of that! As a child, Abe was known to read while his friends were playing (Waugh, 2009). Some people considered him lazy and trying to avoid the hard labor that was expected from a boy growing up in his time. As he entered his teens, he did the chores expected from him,

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

(continued)

which made him very well built and athletic, and rather skilful in handling an axe. “Lincoln made extraordinary efforts to attain knowledge while working on a farm, splitting rails for fences, and keeping store at New Salem, Illinois” (Abraham Lincoln, [n.d.](#))

The impressively tall, skinny young man ultimately became a lawyer, and taught himself to become a superb communicator, well understood by aristocrats and paupers, highly educated and unlettered alike. His communication skills soon drew him to the political arena, and from 1834 to 1846 he served as a member of the Illinois House of Representatives. While some of Lincoln’s contemporaries looked down on him because of his humble background, Lincoln was not one to be defeated easily. His ambition and insights simply would not allow him to. Lincoln’s success in politics may be attributed to his deep understanding of human nature (Blumenthal, [2012](#)). His law partner, William H. Herndon, described Lincoln’s performance in life as follows: “His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest.” (Blumenthal, p. 33). It was this very ambition that pushed Lincoln to return to politics in 1854 after a few years of retreating to his law office. He was disturbed by the developments of the day, and most of all by his conviction that slavery should be stopped from further spreading over the nation. By the time he returned, Abe was ready to wake up a nation, and he vigorously entered the debates. In 1858, Lincoln ran against Stephen A. Douglas for Senator. He lost the election, but in debating with Douglas he gained a national reputation that won him the Republican nomination for President in 1860 (Abraham Lincoln, [n.d.](#)).

Lincoln’s political ambition was not selfishly focused: it was driven by what he perceived as his calling to save the country in such a way that slavery would become an extinct phenomenon. In general, Lincoln’s ambitious nature served as a constant driving motive in his life. His sense of humor, not in the least self-humor, and his insatiable quest to learn, took him to legislative chambers, saloons, political gatherings, social parties, courtrooms, and any venue where he could possibly learn something. He loved the opportunity of having a good political conversation with fellow politicians.

The fact that Lincoln was able to use his ambition as a survival skill can be derived from the fact that he suffered many losses in life, yet never gave up. He dealt with the death of his mother when he was only nine, his first love Ann Rutledge when she was 22, and his son Eddie 1 month before becoming 4 years of age, in 1850. Even when he was president, he was not free from tragedy: the fight to keep the country together and abolish slavery was a difficult and excruciating one. He lost many friends in the civil war that erupted, and lost his 11-year-old son Willie to typhus in 1862. Lincoln was reelected in 1864, very much against his own expectations, but was assassinated 1 year later, on April 14 1865 (Good Friday) by John Wilkes Booth, a confederate spy from Maryland. The man who pushed for the abolition of slavery paid a dear yet historically worthy price for his ambitious insights.

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Case Questions

1. What would you consider Lincoln's outstanding traits and/or personal characteristics that made him so ambitious?
2. Discuss some advantages and disadvantages Lincoln experienced as a result of his ambition? If necessary, please engage in some additional reading about the man.
3. Was Lincoln's ambition a worthy one in retrospect? Please explain your answer.

Discussion Questions

1. Ambition is fueled by personal traits, such as your level of thoroughness, how outgoing you are (extraversion), your emotional state (neuroticism), and your general mental ability. Please consider your own levels of thoroughness, extraversion, neuroticism, and general mental ability, and explain how you use these traits in setting ambitious goals?
2. How do you feel that your ambition has been encouraged or inhibited so far? Reviewing the gender influences on ambition in this chapter: do you feel that your gender contributed to this encouragement or inhibition? Please explain.
3. Read the section about negative and positive ambition, and then provide an example of each, either in your own life, from people you know, or from research? (About 150 words minimum per example)
4. This chapter discusses six personal problem areas in being ambitious: (1) lack of focus, (2) losing control, (3) strength becoming a weakness, (4) psychosomatic effects, (5) workaholism, and (6) loss of happiness. Please reflect on each of these problem areas, and select which of these six is a current or foreseeable problem area that may affect you. Explain your answer (about 300 words)?
5. Which of the four professional downsides of ambition do you consider most problematic? Have you ever been the victim of any of these four downsides? If so, please explain? If not, please select one or more of these four downsides and explain how you will avoid them from happening if ever you become a leader in a professional setting?

Chapter Summary

This chapter aimed to set the stage for a deeper understanding in the ways ambition could be used for progress.

- Ambition is a strong desire to achieve advancement, honor, or power. It is fueled by personal traits, such as your level of thoroughness, how outgoing you are (extraversion), your emotional state (neuroticism), and your general mental ability.
- Ambition emerges on basis of your personal characteristics and your view of the world. An ambitious person is usually keen on attaining a high level of education, a prestigious job, and a lavish income.
- Ambition should not be confused with aspirations and goals. While aspirations and goals usually target the achievement of one particular accomplishment, such as graduating from college, or getting a desired job, ambition is more habitual in nature: it recurs over the course of our life with different foci.
- Positive ambition is described as being competent, yet reluctantly embarking on a power position, and doing so mainly with the aim to attain communal progress.
- Negative ambition comes across as self-serving, overly aggressive and eager to attain power.
- Ambitious people see opportunities where others see challenges, and they continuously try to expand their skills and connections in order to convert these opportunities into reality.
- Some mindsets of ambitious people are, (1) Improving old, established processes; (2) outperforming competitors; (3) Narrowing the focus, and (4) Finding suitable partners.
- Ambition can also be instilled in teams, such as organizations. When organizations build collective ambition, they outperform competitors, even in the grimmest of times.
- Ambition brings its share of advantages. Ambitious people are generally not miserable from or victimized by this trait, which indicates that they could control their ambition if they wanted to.
- Some critical flaws of ambition are, (1) lack of focus, (2) losing control, (3) strength becoming weakness, (4) psychosomatic effects, (5) workaholism, and (6) loss of happiness.
- Some professional setbacks of Ambition can be (1) intolerance, (2) micro-management and excessive control, (3) increased dissatisfaction, and (4) damaged trust and reputation.

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