



Return on Ambition

A Radical Approach to Your Achievement, Growth, and Well-Being

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12-minute read

Synopsis

Return on Ambition (2021) is a sensible and pragmatic guide for attaining success and achieving your goals. Based on the habits and strategies employed by high-performing and notable people, it gives insights that you can immediately apply to your own life.

Who is it for?

- Ambitious types looking to get an edge
- Plateaued professionals looking to break through to the next level
- Anyone looking to optimize their workflow

About the author

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What's in it for me? Get more in return for your ambition.

While big ambitions require lots of time and energy, they help us become our best selves. But even the most ambitious people find it hard to achieve their goals while keeping up with their self-care. And often, they question whether all their hard work is ultimately worth it.

Ambitious people tend to struggle because they don't understand the nature of their ambition. For starters, they often brush up against the restrictions of social norms as they strive to walk their own paths. And they also want to be good at everything – both professional and personal.

Which is why these blinks are designed to help you grasp the true nature of your ambition, teach you how to quantify it, and, with the help of a few tools, maximize your outcomes.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- how to align your ambitions with what's most important to you;
- how to watch out for the dark side of your ambition; and
- how to craft a personal philosophy of ambition.

Understand the nature of your ambition so you know what you're trying to achieve.

How do you define your ambition? Sure, it's what drives you to work hard and achieve, but achieve what exactly?

As you consider your goals, keep in mind that ambition is kind of like money – not inherently evil, but rather, a means to an end. And in the same way that irresponsible spending can lead to ruin, wrongly channeled ambition, like spending too much time in the office, can lead to dire consequences for your personal life and your health.

Which is why it's important to outline the premise of your ambition – that is, clarify exactly what you want to achieve and how you'll go about doing that. Because if you don't know what you want and there's no end goal, how can you ever expect to feel fulfilled?

The key message here is: Understand the nature of your ambition so you know what you're trying to achieve.

Getting specific about the nature of your ambition will help you pinpoint the size of your aspirations, the intensity with which you need to achieve them, and the direction you want your life to go.

Some people define their goals with mind-boggling specificity. For instance, Jacinda Ardern pursued her ambition with a laser-like focus from the time she joined

the Labour Party at age 17 until she became prime minister of New Zealand by 28. Others pursue their dreams with no set goals in mind. Like Trevor Noah, who navigated a meandering career path. He was fixing computers before he became a comedian and, eventually, the host of *The Daily Show*.

Consider the size of your ambition and the priority it takes in your life. How far do you want to go from where you're at right now? Do you want to be like the chef Jamie Oliver, who makes sure to leave space in his life for family? Or do you want to be more like Rihanna, who's spent the past 14 years repeatedly outdoing herself?

Whether you want to follow a prelaid path or carve out your own, keep in mind that the higher your ambition, the harder it'll be to feel fulfilled. That's because a very high ambition requires a greater return. For instance, if you're trying to build the next Facebook, even a million new users will seem paltry when compared to your goal. Which is all to say, it's best to start with realistic ambitions.

To maximize returns on ambition, prioritize your growth or well-being.

To get a sense of how realistic your ambitions are, it's important to learn how to check the returns that you're getting. To do so, you need to keep track of your well-being, growth, and achievement. Think of this as a holistic approach to ambition – one that takes into account all the various aspects that make your life meaningful.

Too often, ambitious people focus so much on their careers that their growth and well-being suffers. Take Sadafte Abid. After helping found the Kash Foundation, an organization that aids with microfinancing in Pakistan, Abid quickly rose to find herself as the CEO. But she struggled with the role and, eventually, took a step back in order to study entrepreneurship at Harvard. This decision helped her to grow and made her feel more empowered to tackle a challenging role – and today she continues her work with a renewed sense of passion.

The key message here is: To maximize returns on ambition, prioritize your growth or well-being.

In fact, when it comes to ambition, well-being, growth, and achievement are so important that you can think of them as a tripod. If one of the legs collapses, the whole structure comes tumbling down. So it's important you maintain a balance in all three areas, because it's not just about a work-life balance, but making sure *all* your human needs are covered.

Let's start by considering your well-being. All of us have had times when we worked so hard that we blew off

social engagements or postponed workouts. Even if you look back on this period as an especially productive time, ignoring the other aspects of your life will eventually lead to burnout.

And arguably, just as bad as burnout is the feeling of stagnation. A feeling familiar to anyone who's experienced the Sisyphean task of repetitively doing the same work every day without growing. To avoid stagnating, foster a mindset that's geared toward development. People that grow are the ones who take on challenges – whether that's studying new subjects or honing old skills.

Lastly, consider whether you have a clear list of achievement-based priorities. Do this by setting specific goals and having a plan for reaching them. And, as you set out to achieve these goals, do so with healthy expectations and realistic self-assessment. Ambitious people tend to judge themselves too harshly and often overlook their many wins.

The skills needed for great ambition can be your best friends or your worst enemies.

At the age of 21, Danish swimmer Pernille Blume looked to retire from the sport as she was losing belief in her abilities. But after speaking with her coach and gaining more ownership over her training, she decided to dive back in and compete. Shortly afterward, Blume qualified for the 2016 Olympics in Rio, where she went on to win gold. Blume's honesty with herself and her renewed commitment ultimately helped her achieve her dreams.

Unlike Pernille Blume, snowboarder Lindsey Jacobellis was heavily favored to win a gold medal in snowboard cross at the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin. And as the final unfolded, Jacobellis found herself so far in the lead that she felt confident enough to attempt a "method grab." Unfortunately, she didn't stick the landing and her gold medal disappeared in a flash.

Most of the time, your ambition will serve you well, steering you in the right direction and driving you to get the job done. But at the same time, certain aspects of your ambition might make you trip up, and could even cause setbacks.

The key message here is: The skills needed for great ambition can be your best friends or your worst enemies.

As stated earlier, ambition itself isn't inherently bad – what matters is how you use it.

Ambitious people tend to have a lot in common in terms of mindset. They tend to be independent, adaptable, and competitive; they persevere in adversity, forgo convention, and act with boldness. And above all, they're driven.

But all of these positive traits also have a dark side. That strong drive that propels people forward can also make them move too fast to see mistakes or to consider their coworkers' feelings. Remember Facebook's old motto "move fast and break things?" Yeah, they changed that when they realized it didn't serve them so well.

The ultimate problem with all these traits is that they tend to limit your thinking. Boldness can quickly turn to arrogance and sometimes, too much independence can leave you all alone. And while these outcomes are manageable, they limit the return on your ambition.

But these traits are part of you – and they're both strengths and weaknesses. So in the following blink, we'll take a closer look at what drives these character traits so that you can learn how to avoid their dark side.

Going too fast will make you lose sight of the way.

In the 1986 movie Top Gun, the character Maverick is a supremely bold, independent, and competitive fighter pilot competing to win the top spot in flight school. And while his ambitious traits serve him well, at one point, Maverick's eagerness to be the best leads to a plane crash and the death of his copilot Goose.

While Goose's death is certainly an extreme – and Hollywood – example of the dark side of ambition, it does illustrate a point. When your ambition is out of balance, you're more prone to making mistakes, alienating others, and ultimately, losing your sense of self. Just like Maverick did in the aftermath of Goose's death.

The key message here is: Going too fast will make you lose sight of the way.

So let's talk about boldness. This is the trait that often leads ambitious people to dive in before they've gathered all the information or all the skills they need. While they may succeed at first, a time will probably come when their ambition outpaces their skills. And when that time does come, it'll be tempting to take risky shortcuts.

Ambitious people also tend to be lone wolves, preferring to work independently because other people just slow them down. While independence is a great strength, the flip side is that they don't know how to ask for help *and* they're extreme perfectionists. Forced to work alone because no one else can get the job done, ambitious people are prone to burnout.

Lastly, ambitious people are competitive. This not only gives them the determination to keep going but also the insight to understand who and what they're up against. But the dark side really emerges when they become driven by the need to be better than others. Doing so takes the focus off their own goals and turns everything

into a battle – and the stakes are high because their self-worth is on the line.

So remember that the real goal is to maximize your return on ambition. Even the guy who wins the Tour de France – with all those steep climbs he has to battle to keep the lead – has a whole support team behind him. So as much as possible, learn to moderate your competitiveness and appreciate the value of interdependence. And when it comes time to measure your achievement, compare yourself to who you were a year ago and not to those around you.

Unchecked ambition will ultimately slow you down.

Asked by his student how long it'd take to attain enlightenment, the Zen teacher answered: "Ten years." The student replied: "But what if I work twice as hard and meditate twice as much?" The teacher answered: "Twenty years."

The point is that working twice as hard stems as much from impatience as it does from ambition. And in the real world, there are consequences for pushing yourself that hard. Two years after launching the *Huffington Post*, Arianna Huffington collapsed from exhaustion and sleep deprivation from working 18-hour days. And Elon Musk, the founder of Tesla, SpaceX, and countless other ventures, told the *New York Times* that working 120-hour weeks caused him so much stress that he needed medication to fall asleep.

The key message here is: Unchecked ambition will ultimately slow you down.

Granted, achieving your goals will take a lot of hard work and ambitious people seem to thrive on pushing themselves. But perseverance can become a problem when it takes a toll on the body. And when you're too tired to think straight and it's hard to string a coherent sentence together, you'll see diminishing returns. So don't mistake "doing stuff" for actual progress. Likewise, don't take on more than you can handle, because even though you're ambitious, you don't need to say yes to everything.

Driven by an outsized desire, ambitious people think that working harder will lead to more success, but burnout and stress don't lead to good work. Additionally, being overly ambitious can leave you working so much that you lose sight of what you're trying to accomplish or, even worse, tying your self-worth to your accomplishments.

You can tell you're dealing with an outsized desire if you feel like the stakes are constantly being raised. This is a sign that your ambition is growing faster than you can keep up with. Another sign is if you start envying others' overnight success stories, wondering why you haven't "made it" yet. Remember that everyone has their own

challenges – many of which you can't see. The bottom line is, you can't measure your success by someone else's accomplishments.

What all of these ambition-related traits have in common is that they help drive you toward your goal – which seems like a better place than where you're at now. So why not rush to get there? The answer is simple: doing so is likely to make you miserable.

Get clear on the why that drives your ambition.

Offered the position of chief scientist at Amazon, Vivienne Ming turned down the role because it didn't live up to her guiding principle – working to make others' lives better. Instead, Ming chose a position at Emozie, analyzing mobile data to check a user's emotional state. Ming accepted the role because Emozie also allowed her to use this data to help bipolar sufferers. And because Ming's ambition was guided by a set of principles, she found a position that helped her grow, achieve, and take care of her well-being.

If you've ever lost the thread of why your goals are important to you, then double back and reflect on your philosophy of ambition. Based on your defining principles, your philosophy will help to evaluate your success and guide you as you continue to grow in your career.

The key message here is: Get clear on the why that drives your ambition.

What's the difference between having goals and having a philosophy of ambition? For starters, goals are just end results that you're working toward; your philosophy guides why you do the work. While goals can help direct you – say to pursue further education or training – true fulfillment goes beyond crossing an achievement off your list. And guided by a personal philosophy, your goals will be motivated by what truly matters to you – which is the key to true fulfillment.

So set aside a quiet hour to reflect on your philosophy of ambition. Use this time to contemplate what's most important to you now and what might be in the future. What are you grateful for? What makes you feel alive?

Take notes as needed and reflect on your thoughts. Are common themes popping up? Do you see a guiding truth lurking between the lines? And how does this truth guide what you want to achieve in the near future, the next ten years, or over the course of your life?

Keeping this list in mind, craft a handful of principles, using a single sentence for each one. Perhaps you want to use art to heighten people's awareness of nature. Or found a tech start-up combating climate change. Or you want to share your life with a loving partner. These are all great examples of guiding principles because they help remind you what's guiding your ambition in the first place. And as you continue to grow, reflect on them

often, making sure that you're still in harmony with your philosophy of ambition.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that:

Ambition is neither good nor bad. It can help you achieve your dreams or it can lead you to dead ends, bereft of fulfillment. So to get truly good returns on your ambition, consider it in terms of growth and well-being, not just achievement. Reflect on where your goals come from and whether they're truly your own. Be sure to watch out for the darker form in which your ambition can express itself. And craft a personal philosophy of ambition to guide you along your path. In doing these things, you'll set yourself up for greater returns on your ambition and a much more rewarding life.

And here's some more actionable advice:

Set an immediate priority.

While your philosophy of ambition can guide you in the long term, in the short term, you'll need to figure out an immediate priority – the one thing that you need to give all your attention to for the next three months. Choose something aspirational and with the potential to have an impact on your return for ambition. In other words, something that challenges and excites you – and has a big payoff. It's important to note that your immediate priority is singular – just one thing. While this may sound a bit unambitious, your immediate priority will help focus your ambition, channeling energy to where it's needed most. This is the first goal of many that will start getting you those returns on your ambition – and as soon as you achieve it, set another!