

Unleashing “ridiculous” ambition

Ambitious employees at all levels, if nurtured, can be successful for themselves and their employers.



Ambition in perspective

Ambition is the raw material of success. High performers in every field are fueled by an intense desire to succeed—ambition propels them forward and enables them to overcome obstacles and setbacks.

Ambition levels differ markedly among individuals—even among high achievers. Some people seek to excel in their current role and strive for the next promotion and pay raise. Others—particularly in specialized professions—are happy with mastering all facets of their chosen field and performing at a very high level. Yes, these people are ambitious, but the scope of their ambition differs from the small number of people who want to change the world, build a great company, or create a momentous work of art. Compared to others, these people have “ridiculous” ambition.

Where does ridiculous ambition come from within an individual? Is it something that can be recognized, harnessed, and nurtured within individuals? Should organizations seek out people with ridiculous ambition and consciously place them in challenging situations?

Anecdotally, many great leaders throughout history said they were driven by love of what they were doing and trying to accomplish.

Mother Teresa, on a train ride through India, received what she described as “a call within a call” to devote herself to caring for the sick and the poor. Fueled by a love for humanity, she created a worldwide charitable organization to carry out her work and was named the Most Admired Person of the 20th Century.

Warren Buffett seemingly was born with an entrepreneurial spirit. At age six he sold Chiclets from a table in front of his house. For Buffett, investing is an intellectual adventure that he enjoys for its own sake. He says to young people, “Take a job that you love.”

Similarly, Steve Jobs was driven to create user-friendly computers for consumers. He said: “We believe that people with passion can change the world for the better... If you don’t love something, you’re not going to go the extra mile, work the extra weekend, and challenge the status quo as much.”

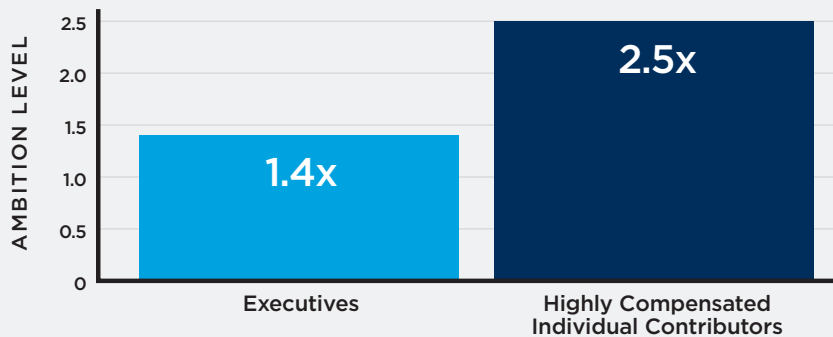
Ambition equals achievement

More formally, Korn Ferry research demonstrates people who test high for Ambition on Korn Ferry's Four Dimensions of Leadership & Talent assessment appreciate working hard, judge achievement according to a goal, and strive to meet and exceed standards. A further analysis of more than 30,000 recent assessments shows that Low Ambition scorers are not motivated by external standards and tend not to work energetically to exceed expectations.

Indeed, people who test high for Ambition will also test high for Achievement, and this group tends to be very successful. If we consider compensation as one basic indicator of business success, Korn Ferry research shows that the most highly compensated executives are 1.4 times more likely to score high in Ambition than other executives. Similarly, the most highly compensated individual contributors are 2.5 times more likely to score high in Ambition than their modestly compensated counterparts.

Ambition and success

The most highly compensated executives and individual contributors are 1.4 times and 2.5 times, respectively, more likely to score high in ambition than their modestly compensated counterparts.



Academic research also supports the link between ambition and success. As Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2012) note in their study, *On the value of aiming high: the causes and consequences of ambition*, “Ambition has stronger effects on career and life success than do distal personality traits, ability and socioeconomic status. We found that ambition was related to important human capital-related outcomes including educational attainment and educational prestige, which in turn related to higher wages, more prestigious work, and greater satisfaction with life.”

Persistence in the face of obstacles

In looking at motivational drivers, individuals who are ambitious are likely driven by challenge or a motivation to achieve in the face of tough obstacles. Their levels of persistence are extremely high. They likely prefer new and difficult projects and assignments that broaden their abilities and skills, and they tend to thrive on learning. This may, in part, explain why ambitious individuals are never satisfied with the status quo and move on to the next goal once they have accomplished a current goal. And many times this sense of persistence and ambition was first experienced in one’s own formative years.

Phil Knight, the founder of Nike, became fascinated with the idea of creating high-quality running shoes while running track in college. In his book, *Shoe Dog*, Knight describes how so many around him thought that starting a running shoe company was crazy. Despite competition from established companies and a lack of finances, Knight was ridiculously ambitious to bring his vision of a next-generation shoe company to life. From a meager \$50 borrowed from his parents, Mr. Knight built a business valued at over \$100 billion this past year.

Wahid Nawabi is the president and CEO of AeroVironment, one of the world’s leading drone technology businesses. He believes his early life experiences as a child in Afghanistan fueled the deep ambition inside of him that led him to become a successful corporate leader. Nawabi’s father was a petroleum engineer and high-ranking government official when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. His father was forced to flee the country with his wife and commissioned an individual to smuggle Wahid and his two sisters out of the country.

Wahid recalls a harrowing journey out of Afghanistan with Soviet troops in pursuit. He remembers being huddled in a small underground bunker with a number of other people while they could hear the footsteps of troops overhead. It was difficult to breathe in the bunker. Two babies suffocated.

Nawabi entered the corporate world in 1992 and quickly assumed positions of increasing importance, including roles with significant profit and loss responsibility and roles where he was charged with the development and execution of strategic plans. He joined AeroVironment in 2011 as a senior vice president and general manager of the EES business segment, where he led the redesign of the business strategy, launched a number of new products, and led several business process improvement projects. He was named CEO in May 2016, capping a remarkable journey.

In most cases, ridiculous ambition develops when people find a goal that ignites their deepest passions and sense of commitment.

Oprah Winfrey, by all accounts, had an extraordinarily difficult childhood. Her grandmother made her dresses out of potato sacks. Growing up, she was reportedly a victim of sexual abuse. She gave birth to a child at age 14, who passed away just two weeks later. But Oprah persevered. After returning to live with her father in Nashville, she became a high school honors student and landed a part-time job in radio. While in college she began co-anchoring the local evening news. She worked her way up through the ranks of television, from a local network anchor in Nashville, to a groundbreaking talk show in Chicago, and eventually to an international media superstar.

Despite her early life difficulties, Oprah may have connected to her deepest talent and true ambition at a very young age. Her grandmother remembers Oprah interviewing her cornucopia doll and the crows on the fence of the family property. Oprah was the youngest news anchor and the first black female news anchor at Nashville’s WLAC television station. Her talent and love for performing was undeniable.

These stories are testament to the importance of not only identifying a mission or calling in life, but the power of persistence in the face of setbacks and obstacles. The lesson is clear: to reach the pinnacle of one’s potential, an individual needs to define and find their true ambition—and to become devoted to a goal that the person *ridiculously* desires to attain.

Nourishing ambition in a company

For organizations, a bit of caution is always warranted. While hiring highly ambitious people is generally a good thing, organizations should also look for complementary qualities.

According to Kumar and Meenakshi in their book, *Organizational Behavior*, executives who do not combine a high need for achievement with tendencies toward affiliation, adaptability, and consensus-building can create problematic environments for teams.

Organizations should consider these four tactics to maximize the effectiveness of highly ambitious employees:

1. Assess your employees early in their tenure.

Understand quickly who exhibits those markers for very high achievement. It might not always be those who currently lean in the loudest.

2. Strategically align projects and roles that can focus your employee's ambitions.

This is one important way to accelerate business outcomes while decreasing unwanted attrition in high achievers or those around them.

3. Provide coaching.

Giving your high achievers opportunities to round out their leadership qualities will help both the company and the employee.

4. Develop a long-term career path with them.

You can help retain your high achievers if they can see how excelling at your organization will satisfy their need to consistently reach new heights.

Ultimately there's no substitute for high levels of ambition—either on a personal or organizational level. The key is to align one's deepest ambition (or an employee's deepest ambition) with a pathway for attaining the grand prize. Creating this alignment can unleash that ridiculous ambition and ignite tremendous effort and achievement to change the world.

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