



THE LEADERSHIP CONTEXT

Ambition – Your Friend or Foe?

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What I learned from speaking with Nicolai Tillisch
on The Leadership Diet

By: Pod O'Sullivan



“I am very happy to be in this role and I enjoy the challenge and reward it provides. But when you ask me if I am content - I have to honestly say I feel guilty about not being there enough for my family and actually feel quite lonely a lot of the time”.

This was the reflection of a CEO client. They were “successful” and had worked long and hard to achieve it. Their ambition had enabled their success on one level, but the rewards had come at a cost. This is not uncommon. Ambition is admirable but its relentless drive can have negative personal and relational impacts.

“Ambition is a powerful yearning and drive to attain a future state that is different from today and challenging to reach”

Nicolai Tillisch

Ambitious people are shown to be more educated, have higher status jobs and make more money. *“This often comes at the expense of close relationships and personal wellbeing”*, was the comment of [Nicolai Tillisch](#), in a recent Leadership Diet podcast ([link](#)). Nicolai is co-author of the best-selling, *Return on Ambition: A radical approach to your achievement, growth and wellbeing*, which has just been nominated as one of 10 finalists in getAbstract’s 2021 international Book Award. Grounded in research it is a work he developed with a McKinsey colleague, also with the same first name, Nicolai Chen Nielsen, to investigate and remedy the dark sides or underbellies of ambition.

Nicolai shared with me on the podcast, while the vast majority of executives consider themselves to be successful, the majority also confirmed they struggled to balance the achievement of their aspirations with personal growth and



wellbeing. *“The research shows it is correlated with a higher level of stress, burnout and depression”*, Nicolai explained.

This can be attributed to:

1. **The nature of ambition:** Ambition has strengths and pitfalls, impacting behaviour and mindsets. This “double edged sword” creates unintended consequences.
2. **The nature of drive:** The ambitious executive’s relentless drive to be successful across all they do both personally and professionally.
3. **The nature of self-reflection:** Or, as Nicolai shared, a lack of self-reflection! Most ambitious people claim reflection aids in the fulfilment of their ambitions yet significantly fewer actually take the time to do it.
4. **The nature of change.** Change is difficult even when it is desired (as observed in the work on Adult Development and Immunity to Change. Change requires challenging previously held beliefs and assumptions, many of which were instrumental in the achievement of their success, and consciously making alternative choices.

In their book, Nicolai and Nicolai have developed a useful equation that emerged from their study into ambition.

$$\text{Return on Ambition} = \text{Achievement} + \text{Growth} + \text{Wellbeing (physical and mental)}$$

As a holistic measure of being a fulfilled human being, the equation recognises that return on ambition is dependent on the:

1. degree to which meaningful personal and professional goals are realised (achievement) +
2. degree of learning and development +
3. level of personal happiness, purpose, health and connection.

Interestingly, the lack of development is a more significant contributor to burnout than hard work itself.



Truisms of Return on Ambition

Understanding the realities of ambition are helpful in increasing awareness about its implications and what that means for you:

- The bigger the ambition, the higher the required return to attain satisfaction. So be aware of the challenge and the risk.
- Be aware of context - different people will need to expend different levels of effort to achieve the same ambition depending on where you are starting from, skill level etc. To have a clear and realistic expectation and avoid frustration, appreciate the ambition in the context of your circumstances.
- As ambitions grow and stretch you further, the risk of falling short also increases.
- As ambitions increase, it becomes increasingly challenging to balance the 3 elements of your return. You will need to make greater investments. The more you want the greater the sacrifice. Ensure you are willing and able to put in the necessary resources and effort.

Frenemies of Return on Ambition

One concept I found very useful in Nicolai and Nicolai's book is the one of Frenemies. The things that have helped us to succeed, when overused, can become liabilities. These tendencies are "frenemies" - part friend / part enemy. There is nothing wrong with the tendency itself. What is needed is awareness and control of our use of the tendency so it is only utilised where and to the amount it is useful. We also need the flexibility to reach for an alternate strategy when the usefulness becomes a cost.



EQUATION

RETURN ON AMBITION = ACHIEVEMENT + GROWTH + WELL-BEING

FRENEMIES



CONVENTION: The ability to follow a well-trodden path and attain success as judged by society ... or to get stuck in expectation and routine.



BOLDNESS: The ability to move quickly and throw yourself into new, challenging situations ... or to miscalculate what is required to attain your ambitions.



INDEPENDENCE: The ability to get things done by yourself, without help ... or to fail to include others when needed.



COMPETITIVENESS: The ability to outcompete others and be the best ... or to try to win at all costs.



PERSERVERENCE: The ability to go the extra mile and complete challenging tasks, even when you're overloaded ... or to exhaust yourself frequently and burn out.



DESIRE: The ability to push constantly against the limits of possibility and break new boundaries ... or to chase success for the sake of it.



FLEXIBILITY: The ability to adapt adroitly to different people and situations ... or to get constantly swayed by others.

TOOLBOX

MANAGE YOURSELF AS AN ASSET



PHILOSOPHY OF AMBITION: Your guiding principles for the future, which you can evolve as you continue to learn.



IMMEDIATE PRIORITY: Your focus for the next one to three months, including a note on what Frenemy to look out for.

PERFORM AS YOUR ASSET



WEEKLY DELIBERATION: Your intentions for three opportunities over the coming week and the lessons you learn along the way.



FRENEMY RADAR: Your evolving map of where and when your Frenemies cause sensations and friction, and how to handle them.

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*“I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other.”*

William Shakespeare, Macbeth

Given the majority of listeners to The Leadership Diet are successful executives or those who support successful leaders, the notion of both the upside and downside of ambition will be very familiar. What might be less familiar is what to do about it.

I recommend [starting here](#) or [here](#) and assessing how ambition is helping you (or not!).

Pod O'Sullivan is a partner with [The Leadership Context](#), a boutique consultancy that works with CEO's and leadership teams to help them scale their leadership to enable the organisational strategic imperatives, particularly during complex times. His podcast, [The Leadership Diet](#) is widely regarded as an intimate and insightful look at senior leadership for all its aspirations and realities.





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