

## Talking About Ambition

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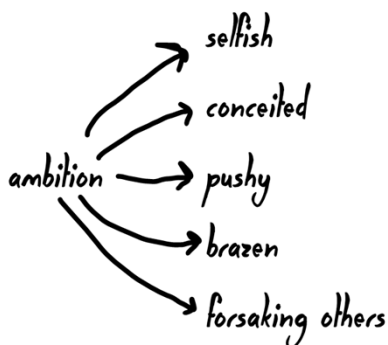
### ambition

am·bi·tion  
noun

“a habitual level of striving for or desiring accomplishment in life situations associated with **SUCCESS**”

Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller (2012)

When we describe someone as ambitious, what images or impressions does it invoke? What perceptions immediately come to mind? Generally, according to Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2012), ambition has been treated in historic literature as a negative trait in people that produces dire consequences.



Someone described as ambitious often brings up assumptions about that person that are typically negative.

This phenomenon bears out.

Interview after interview, leaders admit that they rarely or never talk about their ambitions, especially to those who are more senior. Why is that?

Some leaders say they don't wish to burden others, or they can't find the right opening in conversation, or they're too busy. For many, imposter syndrome is at play. The story leaders tell themselves is that they aren't deserved of what they want and are afraid that a conversation about ambition might just validate that story.

Overwhelmingly though, leaders say they are trying to avoid creating any negative connotations. Avoiding a brand that includes those negative descriptions often associated with ambition.

The point is the topic seems to be left undiscussed.

The result is a situational guessing game where aspiring leaders don't know where they stand relative to their secret ambitions and those who are responsible for helping them grow and develop are left unconsciously guessing and potentially, over relying on their impressions.

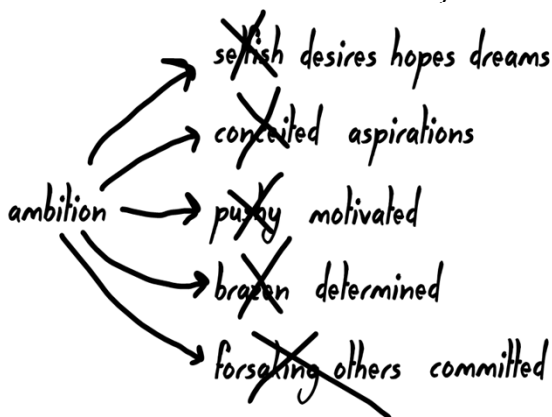
### Idea In Brief

Expressing a sincere desire, and the ability to clearly and cleanly articulate a vision of why one holds those aspirations, shifts ambition from a concept to a tangible goal. That shift can bring the right conversations, expectations, results, and development necessary to the forefront.

## Reframing Ambition

In order to talk about ambition, first we must reframe it. Although we can all think of more than one colleague who shamelessly self-promotes or whose behavior can be described by many of the words above, they're just ruining it for the rest of us because those synonyms aren't really synonyms.

In reality, the synonyms for ambition are quite positive, as are the consequences. Again, Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller (2012) found that ambition is "positively related to educational attainment, occupation prestige, and income". In fact, a comprehensive analysis of empirical studies of ambition, the psychological characteristics are actually



quite favorable. Ambitious people seem to have characteristics that include things like clarity of goals, motivation to achieve those goals, positive attitudes

toward self, others, and work, and self-regulation. Ambitious people have clarity of purpose, are focused, and confident (Barsukova, 2016). At a minimum, ambition is an accelerator, if not a flat-out requirement, in order to be promoted in the workplace.

So how do we talk about Ambition, then?

## Think First, Then Talk

There are three things to think about and get clear on before having a discussion about ambition: the context, what you want and why.

As you go through the next few sections, one or all of these thought-provoking questions may resonate with you. Journal, note take, do whatever works for you to gain clarity and decide what you need to do.

## The Context

Understanding the context in which you want to come forward with your ambitions is critical to a successful conversation. If we step out of a certain context and into another, things change. Think about the situational variables to be considered. What is going on around you and if

internal or external factors are calling you to disclose your ambition.

## The What of Your Ambition

Think about your purpose, your goals. Find clarity in your answers to questions like:

- *What do I want to create for myself and what will the impact of that creation be on others?*
- *What do I aspire to contribute?*
- *What am I motivated to achieve?*

## The Why of your Ambition

Why do you care? What's in it for you? Figure out what a valuable, meaningful reward for your contributions is by considering things like:

- *What form of recognition is most meaningful and valuable for me?*
- *Do I want the badge value of promotion? Is the inclusion in the next level something I value?*
- *Do I want public recognition? Private recognition?*
- *At what frequency do I want to be recognized for my achievements? Who do I want to hear from?*

Tell the truth to yourself. If you want the badge value of a promotion, admit it. If it's financial recognition you want, admit it. Why you are motivated is important. and it's just as important that you can explain it to others.

If it's something different you desire, pick that apart. The point is to do some real work to discover what you truly want.

Now you are ready to plan and have your conversation.

## Planning the Conversation

All conversations have a flow, whether we're deliberate about it or not. Planning, using a framework for how you want the conversation to flow can be useful preparation.

Here's one way to plan.

Organize around your ambition and motivations (the **What** and **Why**) and anticipate what thoughts, beliefs, ideas others might bring to the discussion.

Clearly define your desired outcome of the conversation – and anticipate the desired outcomes of others.

*What is the outcome you want from the conversation? Do you want to raise awareness, build advocacy, gain advice or mentoring, create an action plan? Being clear is critical.*

Recognize the intersection of what you want and what others want. Be ready for the dialogue by having your own assessment. Prepare for positive intentions – what's possible versus what's in the way.

Identify what might derail the conversation and think of how you might redirect if that happens

Consider the context and timing; choose the timing wisely. Does the context provide a safe place to be forthcoming about your thoughts and feelings? Or might you be wise to stick to only rational content.

## Having the Conversation

If the context and timing allow, open the conversation with honest feeling, beliefs or ideas and ask to respond with their reaction as well as what they thought coming into the conversation. Introduce your **What** and **Why**.

Assess the state of opportunity. Create a dialogue by asking the other person's opinion about the current state of opportunity. Engage with a curious mind to learn and

gather information that will help you and others take action. This is a place of discovery and determining what's possible.

Discuss and agree on next steps

Go try it. If you're risk averse, start small. Begin by finding a safe place to try on your newly found insights, perhaps practice with someone in your network whom you trust to give you valuable feedback.

## References:

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*I'm Linda Layton and I'm a Multidisciplinary Coach. I'm also an analyst, researcher, curator of the un/not yet popular, overlooked, or left behind, solopreneur, and matriarch.*

*The purpose of **The Multidisciplinary Coach** is to cultivate and integrate multiple points of view into a cohesive approach to leadership and organizational development.*