

## Praise for ***RETURN ON AMBITION***

“Your ambitions are often the biggest investment that you make in life. Yet managing the return in a deliberate and conscious manner can be challenging. This book will show you the way.”

—**RASMUS HOUGAARD**, Founder and managing director of Potential Project and best-selling author of *One Second Ahead* and *The Mind of the Leader*

“Leaders everywhere are facing increasingly uncertain and volatile operating environments and must continue to evolve at a commensurate pace. *Return on Ambition* provides a practical toolbox to help leaders better understand their motivations, uncover mindsets that do not serve them, and embark on a continuous development journey to stay ahead of the curve.”

—**CLAUDIO FESER**, Former McKinsey & Company senior partner, founding member of McKinsey’s Leadership Development Practice, and author of *Serial Innovators*, *When Execution Isn’t Enough*, and *Leadership at Scale*

“Finally! *Return on Ambition* kills one of the unhealthiest ‘truths’ and self-fulfilling prophecies in the professional world—that people with bold professional ambitions simply need to sacrifice most other important areas in their lives to become successful. The authors not only kill this long-lived myth, but they also explain how it leads to diminishing returns of the efforts you put into pursuing your ambition. They convincingly explain how decisive it is for you to instead integrate your professional ambition with areas such as learning, personal growth, well-being, and a rich social life to drive true success. But most importantly, they give you well-proven and simple tools to succeed at this unfortunately rare achievement among the vast majority of professionals. This is what awaits you in *Return on Ambition*. What are you waiting for? Is it not time you get more bang for your buck?”

—**STEFAN FALK**, Human performance expert, coach, and author of *PSYCHED: How to be Healthier, Happier, and More Productive in the High-Pressure Workplace of the Future*

“*Return on Ambition* helps readers answer three fundamental questions about their life: What is my ambition, what gets in the way of my ambition, and how can I improve my return on ambition? Each question has rich theoretical underpinnings and is brought to life through stories and anecdotes. This book shows how too much ambition can actually trip you up, and helps readers shift mindsets and behaviors that may be holding them back. A must-read if you have pedal to the metal in life!”

—**DR. CHÉRIE CARTER-SCOTT**, MCC, #1 *New York Times* best-selling author of *If Life Is a Game, These Are the Rules*, *Transformational Life Coaching*, *Negaholics: Stop Being Negative . . . Reclaim Your Happiness*, and 18 other titles

“The concept of a ‘return’ on ambition was eye-opening for me. In the same way that we manage the return on assets or return on investments, it is critical to optimise the outputs of the colossal efforts we put into our ambitions. *Return on Ambition* shows you how to do this, in fun, inspiring, and often surprising ways.”

—**PHIL CHAMBERS**, CEO and cofounder of Peakon

“In a world of increasing complexity and change, simply running faster is no longer enough. *Return on Ambition* helps readers to think more holistically about their ambitions and make conscious choices about what is right for them. It includes a unique ‘self-coaching’ approach, which helps readers bring the theory into practice in a sustainable way.”

—**DR. NICK VAN DAM**, Chief of the IE University Center for Corporate Learning Innovation, internationally recognized thought leader on learning innovations and leadership development, and author or co-author of more than 25 books and articles

“As all of us are faced with a now urgent need to create new maps for our lives and refine our own sense of purpose, what is needed is wise guidance on decision criteria, frameworks for powerful introspection, and potent coaching. *Return on Ambition* offers just such practical insight, and will help you understand the meaning available from, and the pitfalls to avoid in, pursuing ambition and devoting oneself to excellence.”

—**AMY ELIZABETH FOX**, CEO, Mobius Executive Leadership

“The concept of ambition is evolving as are most human mindsets and structures. This book dives deeper into the concept of the more conscious approach to ambition and how you can design a more elegant, deliberate, and patient form of it.”

—**JOHN SANEI**, Keynote speaker, foresight strategist, and author of the bestsellers *What’s Your Moonshot?*, *Magnetiize*, and *FOREsight*

“*Return on Ambition* reveals a truth about leadership—ambition can actually make it more difficult to succeed and, even as we do succeed, it can rob much of the joy from the effort. This book helps us to become aware of how our ambitions can manage us. It instructs us how to start managing our ambitions more consciously. Among many actionable suggestions, it encourages all of us to carefully reflect on our philosophy of success: Do we strive to prove ourselves worthy or to serve something larger than ourselves? *Return on Ambition* can help anyone with big dreams to achieve them and do so while enjoying the ride.”

—**BOB ANDERSON**, Founder of The Leadership Circle and  
co-author of *Mastering Leadership* and *Scaling Leadership*

“Too often we speed towards our goals without thinking sufficiently about the direction and speed we are driving. *Return on Ambition* gives you a framework to reflect deeply on what’s really important to you—and provides practical ‘self-coaching’ tools that anyone can apply. Read this book!”

—**LARS TVEDE**, Cofounder of venture capital fund Nordic Eye  
and the prediction company Supertrends Institute, and best-selling  
author of 17 books including *Entrepreneur*, *Supertrends*, *The Creative Society*, and *The Psychology of Finance and Business Cycles*

“Some ambitious people are fortunate enough to have a mentor or relative who can help them escape the nightmare side effects of seeking out their dreams. Most, unfortunately, learn the hard way after sacrificing the wrong things on the altar of their ambitions. Nielsen and Tillisch, as it turns out, are the kind uncles we have all been missing, who take us aside after dinner to show us a better path. Backed by their experience and cutting-edge research, these two Nicolais help us make better choices as we integrate all of our dreams into one full life. Ambition can be a corrosive power that ultimately ruins our joys, or, with the help of this wise and practical guide, can be the fuel for forging beautiful lives of accomplishment and connection.”

—**JENNIFER GARVEY BERGER**, Cofounder of Cultivating Leadership  
and author of *Unlocking Leadership Mindtraps* and *Changing on the Job*

“*In Return on Ambition*, the two Nicolais provide a hands-on approach to how all of us ambitious people can ensure that we actually get enough bang for our buck and not only succeed professionally, but also achieve personal growth, well-being, and, ultimately, a better life. Dive in and let the authors guide you through a journey towards your own unique return on ambition.”

—**KRIS ØSTERGAARD**, Cofounder of SingularityU Nordic and best-selling author of *Transforming Legacy Organizations*

“We are often told that elements such as perseverance, boldness, competitiveness, and desire are unanimously positive, and that we should strive to cultivate more of each one. However, *Return on Ambition* gives you the space to reflect on and question your true motivations and guides you towards a more deliberate and creative manifestation of your dreams. The core principles it outlines are relevant for everyone, regardless of the size and nature of their ambition. I wholeheartedly recommend this book.”

—**WADIA AIT HAMZA**, Head of the Global Shapers Community, World Economic Forum

“The world desperately needs a new breed of self-aware and authentic leaders who stay true to an elevating, virtuous calling, especially when in the face of adversity. This refreshing book provides a powerful approach to reconsider what ‘success’ means to you, to grapple with what can get in the way of achieving it, and a novel method to ‘self-coach’ yourself forward and up, even in the toughest weather. Read this book, and keep climbing!”

—**DR. PAUL G. STOLTZ**, Founder and CEO of PEAK Learning, Inc, creator of the globally acclaimed AQ® (Adversity Quotient®) theory and methods, and author of five best-selling books including *Adversity Quotient*, *The Adversity Advantage*, and *GRIT*

*“Return on Ambition* counsels ambitious people to live a full and hopefully harmonious life and achieve success. The book argues convincingly, based on extensive research, that well-being and personal growth are powerful factors in achieving results over time. My professional work has meant and continues to mean a lot to me, and yet I would never be who I am or do what I do without living a full life with my family, friends, and activities and interests detached from work. The two Nicolais offer helpful ways to think of ourselves and provide highly practical tools to apply in daily life.”

—**SUSANNE MØRCH KOCH**, CEO of Tivoli

*“Return on Ambition* will guide you through some of the most important questions in life: Is ambition all you are about? Who are you truly? Are you living life as fully as you can? The deep paradox about this book is that it cautions you about blind ambition, while also asking you to be supremely ambitious in thinking more deeply about what drive and a multidimensional life truly mean to you. With a beautiful combination of research, storytelling, and practical tools, this book is a must-read for anyone open to a fresh recalibration of their lives.”

—**DR. SRINI PILLAY**, CEO of NeuroBusiness Group,  
CMO and cofounder of Reulay, former Assistant Professor  
of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, and author of  
*Tinker, Dabble, Doodle, Try: Unlock the Power of an Unfocused Mind*

“I have been in close contact with thousands of highly ambitious people, from young graduates to middle managers to executives. Most of them would have had an easier life without sacrificing their ambitions, had they only applied two or three of the principles outlined in this book.”

—**KENT JONASEN**, CEO, Leadership Pipeline Institute

“*Return on Ambition* helps any ambitious adult to take their life into perspective and excel at what means most for them. The book elegantly combines powerful questioning techniques and tools that the readers can apply daily. It draws insights and asks questions that are typically accessible otherwise only in sophisticated leadership development programs or through top-notch coaches.”

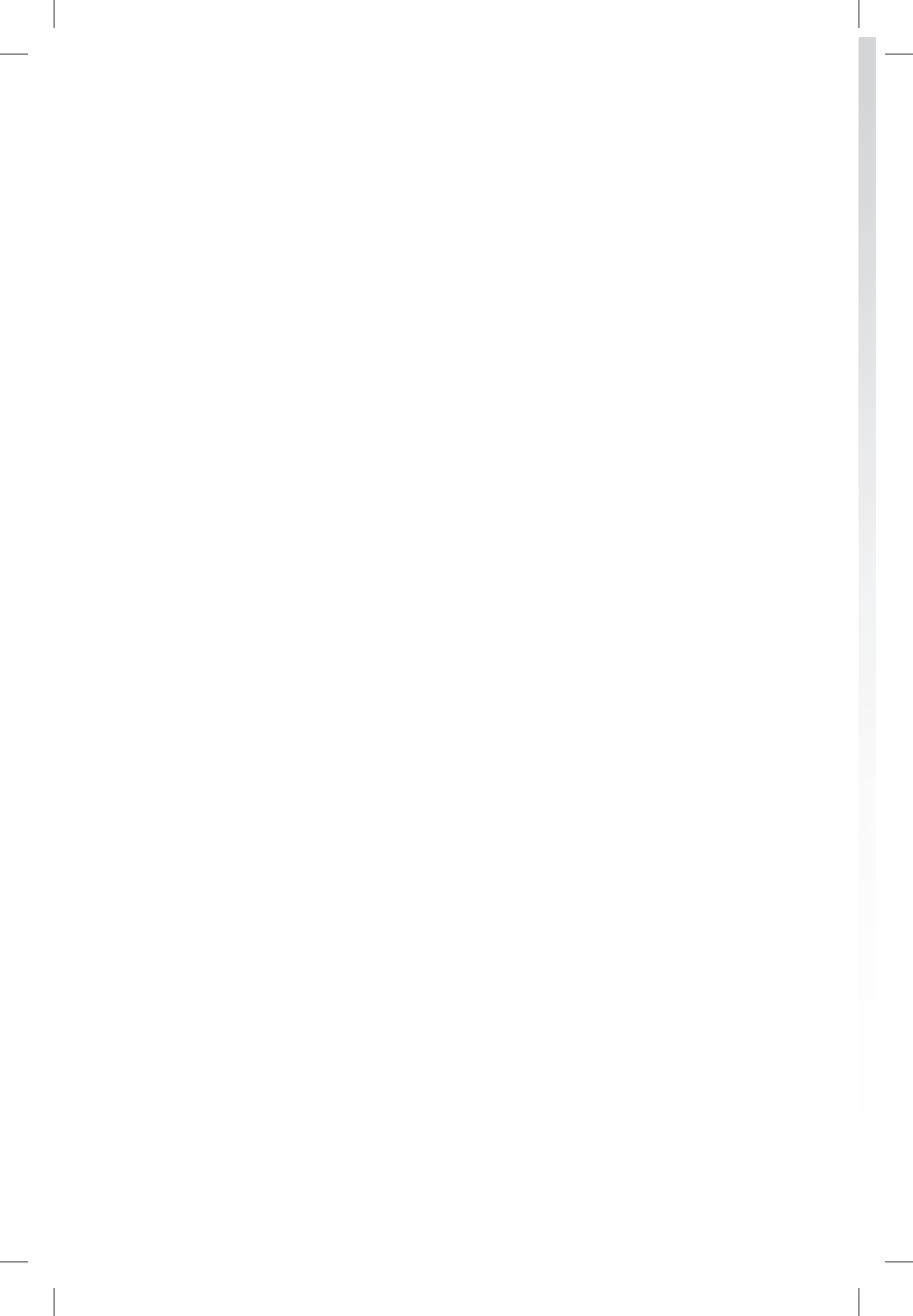
—**TOR MESOY**, Founder and Managing Director,  
Agnus Consulting, author of *Musings on Leadership*,  
and lecturer at The University of Hong Kong

“I have met countless fantastic and ambitious people with phenomenal drive and passion who have a hard time finding the right balance in their life and sometimes live with regrets. However, when leaders use their ambition and drive combined with a sense of purpose, it changes their life and the lives of those they interact with. *Return on Ambition* will show you how to achieve this balance and be a better you. Isn't that what we are all aiming for?”

—**MURIELLE PEREIRA**, Head of Leadership  
Development, Majid Al Futtai

“What a brilliant principle articulated with such simplicity that this book should be in everybody's life curriculum. You crack it right at the very beginning with your excellent definition of ambition—achievement, growth and well-being! Well-being comes from within and it is when your ambition is driven intrinsically that it delivers the real return; the return of deep satisfaction, contentment and self-worth. I see so many people distracted by false ambition, and ambition driven by the external forces of societal expectation. The return always disappoints. The Nicolais have captured the essence of true ambition in an accessible style. Brilliant—read, enjoy, and reap the benefits.”

—**MANLEY HOPKINSON**, FRSA FRGS, explorer, speaker,  
business leader and performance catalyst. Founder of the  
Compassionate Leadership Academy and author of the highly  
acclaimed book, *Compassionate Leadership*





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

# RETURN ON AMBITION

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Nicolai Chen Nielsen  
& Nicolai Tillisch



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First Edition

**Nicolai Chen Nielsen:**

*To Mama, Baba, and Natasja—our family has been the bedrock of everything I do. Thank you for your unconditional love, support, and encouragement.*

**Nicolai Tillisch:**

*To Margaux and Axel—follow your dreams and be ambitious without compromising your beautiful souls. We all learn our own lessons, and yet I hope that this book, at some point, can help you on your way.*



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## INTRODUCTION

# Bang for Your Buck

*Most ambitious people struggle to achieve their aspirations while also maintaining their personal growth and well-being, and they question whether the large investment they are making to reach their goals is worth it.*

**DO YOU HAVE** grand achievements you hope to accomplish? Do you constantly try to develop yourself? Are you striving to live a more balanced life? If you answered an emphatic “yes” to even one of these questions, this book is for you.

We have worked with some of the most ambitious people in the world, and we’ve seen firsthand how ambition can drive people to great heights and bring tremendous fulfillment. But we’ve also seen how ambition can result in painful setbacks. Why is this? The reality is that most people could get a higher return on their efforts if they understood the underlying drivers of ambition—and also how to get the most out of those drivers. You can get more bang for your buck if you know how to do it.

The efforts sparked by your ambition may be the biggest investments you make in your lifetime, consuming great swathes of your time, energy, and money. It compels people to make things happen, to become better at something, and to take on new challenges. Your ambitions shape the way you work and the way you treat your loved ones and yourself.

Ambition can be driven by a hunger for power, fame, and fortune, or it can be motivated by a more altruistic aspiration to make the world a better place. Often it is a combination of both. Yet while ambition can

foster dreams, it also can lead to punishing sacrifices, regrets, and desolation. If left unchecked, ambition can run wild and take control, leading to impulsive and even harmful decisions. We have seen countless stories of ambitious people focusing on the wrong goal—the wrong mountain to climb, so to speak—only to regret the destination once they reach the summit. Others climb the right mountain, but do it the wrong way, and end up feeling exhausted and unfulfilled. While research shows that ambitious people generally become more educated, secure higher-status jobs, and make more money than their less ambitious peers, this often comes at the expense of close relationships and personal well-being.<sup>1</sup>

So ask yourself: How can I make sure I get the most positive Return on Ambition? What can I do to manage this investment better? Are the efforts I'm putting into my ambitions worth the time I'm spending, or could I accomplish my goals differently or with a more efficient use of my energy?

This book is for readers of all ages; ambition doesn't have an age limit. Maybe you're young, at university, and brimming with confidence. Perhaps you're 10 or 15 or more years into your career and wondering what's next. Maybe you're looking back on decades of experience and thinking about your legacy. The purpose of this book is threefold: to help you understand your ambition, to show you how to measure it, and to give you the tools—backed by research and practice—to improve your returns.

## **A More Holistic Approach to Ambition**

We find in our research and practice that the vast majority of professionals across industries consider themselves to be ambitious.<sup>2</sup> However, ambitious people are often unaware of how much their ambition governs them and of the potential they have to take charge and master it, to unleash it more fully. The difference can be substantial, and is often untapped. To our astonishment, in our survey of over 175 professionals globally, approximately 60% said they were struggling to achieve their aspirations while also maintaining their personal growth and well-being. We didn't expect the majority of people to answer this way. Similarly, about half of the respondents told us that



they doubted whether their ambitions would serve them well in the long run, and they wondered whether all their hard work would actually pay off in the future.

The pervasiveness of ambition coupled with the widespread challenge in managing it surprised us. When we looked into it further, we discovered four main reasons ambitious people seem to struggle so much.

First, while numerous books set out to help people pursue their goals and aspirations, none of them focus specifically on the nature of ambition, its strengths and pitfalls, and how to manage it better. Ambitious people face unique opportunities and challenges that derive from the very fact that they have relentless drive and grand visions for themselves and for the world. Generic personal development approaches—such as those described in many books and websites on personal development—don't cut it for them, because these sources fail to describe the essential nuances of ambition and how it impacts people's behaviors and mindsets.

Second, despite the market's overload of self-development strategies, we found a gap in the applied coaching practice when dealing with ambitious people. Yes, there are various tools to assess your personality, measure your leadership competencies, and connect with your inner voice. But ambitious people differ in that they won't be satisfied with success in just one arena; they want to succeed in everything they do. To do this, we took a holistic approach and developed a way for our clients to measure and manage precisely how well they were realizing their ambitions—in their personal *and* professional lives.

Third, there is extensive and expanding evidence that people in general—ambitious or not—struggle to change, even when they deeply desire to do so. Our beliefs and assumptions about ourselves and each other limit us, and we are much more prone to biases and instinctive reactions than we realize. The domain within psychology called “stages of adult development” describes, for example, the difficulty and discomfort people have in breaking down old paradigms and transcending to higher and more intentional stages of development.<sup>3</sup>

Ambitious people are particularly prone to these struggles as they move from unconsciously following social norms to carving out their own paths

in life. This shift entails creating their own unique identity and making conscious choices that might be informed by, but are not formed by, external influences. Ambitious people may experience friction as they question previously held beliefs and assumptions and experiment with new ways of living and being.

Fourth, we realized that all the great books and coaches in the world can't help people achieve their ambitions if they don't take time for self-reflection. That's right—good old-fashioned quiet time for introspection. Self-reflection is a key component of personal development, yet people often neglect it. We found that a vast majority (87%) of ambitious people claim that reflecting on their goals, growth, and well-being helps them fulfill their ambitions—yet of this majority, only 65% actually take the time for it. In other words, almost 4 out of 10 people who believe that self-reflection matters don't bother to make time for it.<sup>4</sup>

Why not? For starters, ambitious people are busy and often feel “underwater,” to use a term we heard frequently in our interviews. Even when ambitious people *do* carve out time for reflection, many don't know how to go about it.

That's where we come in: This book will help you create the space to get to know yourself better and stretch your “ambition” muscles further. Through our research and in our coaching practices, we have cracked the code of ambition and present it here to help the reader manage it, rather than be managed by it.

Our approach is grounded in science and experience. In addition to extensive research, a global survey, and a wide range of interviews with people who have consciously managed the return they get on their ambition, we authors have battle-tested this approach in the field. We have designed and facilitated development programs involving thousands of professionals and have coached many hundreds of individuals across four continents—including highly successful CEOs, athletes, artists, entrepreneurs, and even new graduates. We've applied our approach in our professional practices, and we continue to evaluate what works for our clients and the circumstances under which it succeeds.

But because we can't be there to work with you in person, this book

offers an innovative process of “self-coaching.” It will help you learn how to reflect, which will help you understand yourself better and allow you to make any necessary adjustments in your life.

Throughout the book we pose three overarching questions: What is your Return on Ambition? What gets in the way of your Return on Ambition? How do you increase your Return on Ambition?















PART 1	PART 2	PART 3
<p><b>What is Your Return on Ambition?</b></p> <p>Chapter 1 .....   <b>The Core Concept</b></p> <p>Chapter 2 .....   <b>Defining the Premises of Your Ambition</b></p> <p>Chapter 3 .....   <b>Measuring Your Return</b></p>	<p><b>What Gets in the Way of Your Return on Ambition?</b></p> <p>Chapter 4  <b>The 7 Frenemies</b></p> <p>Chapter 5—Frenemy 1 .....   <b>Convention</b></p> <p>Chapter 6—Frenemy 2 .....   <b>Boldness</b></p> <p>Chapter 7—Frenemy 3 .....   <b>Independence</b></p> <p>Chapter 8—Frenemy 4 .....   <b>Competitiveness</b></p> <p>Chapter 9—Frenemy 5 .....   <b>Perseverance</b></p> <p>Chapter 10—Frenemy 6 .....   <b>Desire</b></p> <p>Chapter 11—Frenemy 7 .....   <b>Flexibility</b></p>	<p><b>How Do You Increase Your Return on Ambition?</b></p> <p>Chapter 12  <b>The Return on Ambition Toolbox</b></p> <p>Chapter 13—Tool 1 .....   <b>Philosophy of Ambition</b></p> <p>Chapter 14—Tool 2 .....   <b>Immediate Priority</b></p> <p>Chapter 15—Tool 3 .....   <b>Weekly Deliberation</b></p> <p>Chapter 16—Tool 4 .....   <b>Frenemy Radar</b></p> <p>Chapter 17  <b>The Toolbox in Action</b></p>

Figure 1—Book Structure

## The Journey Ahead

We are inviting you to undertake a deeply personal endeavor: to see your professional and personal ambition from new and different perspectives, and to answer questions that can expand your awareness and help you make vital choices. While you may have an intellectual understanding of the importance of thinking holistically about your ambition and the factors

that may be holding you back, that insight merely scratches the surface of the challenge. You must dig deeper to increase your Return on Ambition.

As you read this book, we have three requests. First, because we use dialogue to address you directly, we encourage you to respond, and to respond aloud if you feel so inclined. We want our direct approach to inspire debate—with yourself and, possibly, with us. We believe speaking directly to you allows us to put the ball in your court so you feel the need to make the next play.

Second, we recommend slowing down as you read and making sure you take time for reflection. Take the time to go on long walks or do whatever frees your mind. Make notes when reading. We bring these chapters to life with numerous insightful stories. Everyone can learn from these stories, and they may inspire you; but the personal reflection, the application of this information to your life and your way forward, must ultimately be your own. We want to help you understand yourself better as a human being, but we can't do that for you. You must contemplate what is truly important to you and how you will move toward it. To this end, each chapter concludes with a section called "Over to You" comprised of questions and suggestions for personal contemplation.















Third, don't put the book down after the last page and let it disappear on your bookshelf or e-reader. This book is about reflecting differently and living differently. So make something happen. Consult it frequently as you go out and change your world in a positive way. Your new companions are wider awareness, well-considered choices, and a deliberate effort to think things through.

We hope our ideas will foster enlightening "aha" moments to help you increase your awareness, attain clarity, and make more conscious choices about how to live, ultimately leading you to a higher return on your ambition and greater fulfillment. At an aggregate level, we believe this also can contribute to bettering the future of all humanity. Our intention is that the fuel of ambition should propel us all forward in a more collaborative, loving, and peaceful manner.

# PART 1

## What Is Your Return on Ambition?

**PART 1 HELPS** you answer the first key question of the book: What is your Return on Ambition? Here we introduce the core concept of Return on Ambition, which is made up of two elements: your ambition itself and the holistic returns you are getting in terms of achievement, growth, and well-being. We then break down these two elements. We review the premises of your ambition, which serve as a point of departure for assessing your returns. Then we present a quantitative assessment to measure your returns and review the underlying areas that have an impact on your Return on Ambition.

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## ONE

# The Core Concept

*Invest your ambition wisely. It can fuel your future and drive society forward, but left unchecked, it can lead to bankruptcy and despair.*

**WE DEFINE AMBITION** as “a powerful yearning and drive to attain a future state that is different from today and challenging to reach.”

This definition is a slight stretch compared to the dictionary’s version, but if any word should have a grander definition, this is the one. “Future states” can be anything from buying a villa with a garage sheltering a nice sports car to raising a flourishing family to making the world a better place—or, indeed, a combination of all the above. “Yearning” is attached to “drive” to signify that you are determined to realize your ambition and not purely dreaming, while “different” and “challenging” emphasize that reaching your ambition requires a real effort.

To further elaborate on the concept of ambition, let’s use money as a metaphor. Money is neither inherently good nor bad. It is a medium for making things happen, rather like the fuel that powers a car. Our society is built on people’s eagerness to invest their money and earn more. For some people, having a lot is important. For others, it is secondary. Everyone can benefit from maximizing their money’s return (measured broadly and not just in financial terms). However, handled wrongly or irresponsibly, money can lead to ruin.

Much in the same way as money, ambition in itself is neither inherently good nor bad; rather, it is a fuel for attaining a future state that is meaningful and different from today. Your specific purpose and degree of ambition

is personal, and more is not necessarily better. However, all ambitious people invest time, energy, and resources in their ambitions, and they expect a return from all their efforts.

## The Return on Ambition Equation

You can consider your ambition and your return in many ways. Some people like quiet contemplation. Others think with a piece of paper in front of them. Some talk with their friends, relatives, and mentors. Others formalize the process with a coach. In any case, reflection helps. We've found that ambitious people who can carve out the time for personal reflection are more than four times as likely to reach their aspirations—while maintaining a high degree of growth and well-being—as those who don't make time for this. On the other hand, people who do not take the time for personal reflection are 62% more likely to struggle to prioritize competing commitments and 2.1 times more likely to be stressed than those who do make time for personal reflection. They're also more likely to doubt whether the effort they are putting into realizing their ambitions is really worth it.<sup>1</sup>

While simply paying more attention to your current Return on Ambition is helpful, it is not the full answer. You also need to know where to look for inspiration, what drives your return, and how you could do things better.

Let's start by defining Return on Ambition holistically, with an equation outlined in Figure 1.1. We measure your Return on Ambition as the sum of your achievement, growth, and well-being.

### **RETURN ON AMBITION = ACHIEVEMENT + GROWTH + WELL-BEING**

*Figure 1.1—The Return on Ambition Equation*

This holistic view of ambition includes the degree to which you achieve meaningful personal and professional goals, your degree of learning and development, and your level of personal happiness, purpose, health, and connection.



It stems from a complete picture of what it means to be a fulfilled human being, and is consistent with ancient wisdom traditions, more modern research, and indeed in our own research and practice.

You should not focus only on your returns, however. Your degree of achievement, growth, and well-being are all functions of your specific ambition. For instance, if you want to become a top tennis player, you would evaluate how you're doing compared to other tennis players; you wouldn't compare yourself to a judo wrestler. It is critical to have clarity on what is important to you and how you characterize your ambition before you evaluate your returns. If you compare your returns to those of other people who are pursuing different ambitions, you risk misjudging your outcomes, either valuing them too low or too high. Similarly, if your ambitions change significantly, you would likely also evaluate your returns across achievement, growth, and well-being differently.

## Three Truisms of Return on Ambition

In practice, we find that there are three main ways that the nature of your ambition impacts your returns. First, *as your ambitions increase, the bar for fulfillment becomes higher*. A bigger ambition requires a higher return, and it becomes more difficult to be satisfied with less.

For example, entrepreneurs who want to build the “next Facebook”—social media platform—will inevitably be disappointed if they are able to sign up only a few million users at launch. For others with a less bold ambition, a few million users might be a very satisfying achievement. We are not suggesting you should lower your aspired Return on Ambition. Rather, we're cautioning you to be aware that a higher degree of ambition places increased requirements on you to attain certain outcomes.

Also be aware of your unique context. Different individuals will have to expend different levels of effort to reach a given type of ambition, based on their starting point, skills, and work ethic. While we believe everyone has the capacity to stretch greatly, people also need to be realistic. To avoid unnecessary and perpetual frustration, you need to understand the size and

type of your ambition relative to your current context. As your ambitions grow, continue to consider the relationship between the size of your ambition and your resulting need to manage the returns even more vigilantly.

Second, *as your ambitions grow and you stretch yourself further, it increases the risk of falling short*. The more you aim to get out of a given amount of effort, the more stretched your investments in time, energy, and money become. At one extreme, you will have almost no margin for error. If you seek a higher return on your ambition relative to what you are able and willing to put in, you must be sure you can handle a higher risk of falling short.

Third, *as you increase your ambition, it becomes increasingly challenging to balance all three elements of your return*. The greater the size of your ambition and corresponding expectations across achievement, growth, and well-being, the greater the investment you will need to reach your aspired outcomes. The more you want, the more you need to sacrifice. Ambition can saddle you not only with work commitments but also with personal and social obligations that draw on your resources. Your anticipation of, and fixation on, a greater future can lead to an unsustainably high velocity of commitments and costs. Realistically catalogue the investments you will be required to make in order to realize your ambition and make sure you're willing and able to put in the necessary resources and effort.

## Bringing the Concepts to Life

Here and throughout the book, we will illustrate the key concepts and varieties of ambition with the stories of Bella, Jitesh, and Nora and Alexander.

Take **Bella** as an example of the first truism—*as your ambitions increase, the bar for fulfillment becomes higher*.

Bella is not just studying art—she is living it. Her ambition is to use her creations to change people's perceptions about how

humans affect nature. The playfulness with which she once entertained her aspirations turned immediately more serious when a leading art school accepted her as a student. Overnight, the stakes became higher, and with them so did Bella's ambitions.

Although her bubble of self-confidence burst when she first met all of the school's other incredibly talented students, she remains determined to stand out among them in her own way. Due to her steadfast focus on her ambition, her world revolves around school. She thinks about art during almost all her waking hours—as if she were breathing it.

She wakes up at night to write down new ideas, so handwritten notes pile up on her bedside table. The time around exams and assignment deadlines leaves her in a state of insomnia. Her high grades comfort her, but only until the next time she is tested. As her ambitions grow, so does her yearning to become better technically and to produce true masterpieces.

How does Bella's story evolve from here? A person like her could become the next new sensation at an Art Basel exhibition, creating a name that's known for generations to come. Or she could push herself too hard, to the point where her progress plateaus and some of her blossoming fellow students move past her and into the spotlight. When are her ambitions helping her focus on and pursue her dream of changing people's perceptions about the natural world through her art? And when are they strangling her fascinating but fragile spirit? Bella is battling with the first of the three truisms regarding ambition: The bigger her ambitions become, the higher she sets the bar for becoming fulfilled.

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To illustrate the second truism—*as your ambitions grow and you stretch yourself further, it increases the risk of falling short*—consider **Jitesh**.

A well-dressed young urban professional who favors bespoke shirts and suits, Jitesh sparks smiles and laughs from most people when he is fully present and relaxed. His friends look forward to spending time with him, and they admire his accomplishments. He knew from a young age that he wanted to become a businessman. He completed his MBA with distinction and then landed a great job—complete with a desk in an impressive skyscraper.

Jitesh moved quickly up the ranks by delivering thorough work on time. He seemed unstoppable at first—until he was promoted to be the manager of his team after 18 months.

For him, the move is, in principle, just checking off another box on his way to the very top. But for the first time, Jitesh has become shaky in his professional role. He now has increased visibility in the company, which opens up opportunities for further promotions if all goes well. However, this new role also brings with it higher expectations from his superiors and from Jitesh himself. The stakes are raised, and the ways in which things can go wrong are multiplying.

He was never impressed with his colleagues, and now as his subordinates they seem downright disappointing. Jitesh could live with their lackluster commitment to work if that was the only problem, but it isn't. They're incompetent; it's painfully hard to get them to perform in exactly the way they need to. If he leaves them on their own, the quality of their work comes in below Jitesh's expectations. His team members make mistakes all the time, and they're defensive about it. Everything seems unintentional from their side, but Jitesh increasingly feels they have no respect for him—or for how important it is for him to succeed. His efforts to gather his team members and talk through these

problems are unfruitful. The team uses the sessions to complain about other departments and to air new excuses—always without taking ownership for fixing things.

Due to his great expectations, Jitesh ends up working even harder than ever before to compensate for his underperforming team members. Often, after a long day's work, he sits up much of the night to redo work for which one of his subordinates was responsible. Keeping his sleeves rolled up merely to ensure the delivery of expected weekly work has left Jitesh overworked and tired and has reduced the overall effectiveness of the team, instead of enhancing it. He feels challenged and caught up in a whirlwind of expectations, but he does not dare do anything different for fear of failing.

To what extent are Jitesh's ambitions helping him during these late nights? He might very well think he is doing everything he can to succeed, but does his focus on avoiding any deviations from his high standards risk overshadowing his need to motivate and develop his team? And how is doing all the work himself actually training his team to improve? Is Jitesh playing to win or to avoid losing?

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**Nora** and **Alexander** appear highly successful, but they face substantial personal concerns. They illustrate the third truism: *As you increase your ambition, it becomes increasingly challenging to balance all three elements of your return.* They are much further into their impressive careers than most people their age, and they balance

*continued*

high degrees of achievement, growth, and well-being. Everyone wants to spend time with them. They are happily married, witty, energetic, and rich with stories from lives spent traveling and living abroad. Other parents envy Nora and Alexander's three children and their good manners, outstanding grades, and well-rounded activities—from sports to volunteer work. From the outside, everything about Nora and Alexander is perfect. They are role models in the “work hard, play hard” category.

However, their personal reality is different. Maintaining their balance as they juggle careers, family, and friends demands higher and higher degrees of effort. Their burn rate is exceptionally high and, with it, their challenges. Nora is proud of everything she has accomplished and loves her children and husband, but she battles a guilty conscience over not being there for her children as much as she would like. Their childhood is passing by while she stays late at the office or travels on business trips. She is never really off the clock—even when she's home—since emails keep her smartphone buzzing, crying out for rapid replies.

Her private life, which is filled with guests and prestigious social events, distances her from her children as much as her work does. Regardless, Nora still manages to give her children more attention than her own parents gave her, though much of her time with the kids is focused on homework and involves a lot of nagging. The children are tired by the time Nora is ready to sit down with them each evening. They would rather play while she stresses about not doing as much with them as the other mothers from their school. Everyone has such great expectations of her, and her ambitious nature allows these expectations to drag her down. She would like to do many things differently, but she doesn't know where to start.

Alexander loves Nora and the children, and he's grateful for

where they are in life, but he has recurring feelings of incredible loneliness. He frequently feels that he is at the bottom of Nora's pyramid of needs—after their kids, her work, her extended family, and all of their many friends. Alexander is better than Nora at spending whole days or, at least, half days of quality time with one, two, or all three children, but he is more overworked and often has weekend meltdowns of exhaustion.

Alexander reports directly to the CEO of a large international corporation. The CEO is new to the company, doesn't understand the business intimately, and frequently sets unrealistic expectations. If Alexander were not so well compensated, or if his family's mortgage were not so big, he would grab his briefcase and leave without ever coming back. Alexander is an obvious candidate for a midlife crisis, like the ones that many of his closest friends have been going through, but he doesn't have the energy to consider other options seriously.

Why can't Nora and Alexander, who have accomplished so much, adjust their priorities to thrive more than they strive? Will they ever reach a point when they feel fulfilled? Are they waiting to achieve complete economic independence—or is that just something they keep telling themselves? And when they one day get more leisure time, as they hope to, will they be able to truly enjoy it, given that they can barely appreciate all they have now? Their ambitious aspirations in all areas of their lives have led Nora and Alexander to spread themselves too thin, yet they have to make a constant effort to keep up with their high burn rate composed of fixed monthly costs, expensive add-ons, and all their explicit and implicit time commitments.

## OVER TO YOU

Bigger ambitions are exciting, but they can lead you to feel unfulfilled even if you achieve impressive results on the surface, just like Bella, Jitesh, and Nora and Alexander. Your ambitions might be so big that you are constantly frustrated, or constantly exhausted, or both. Or you might be among those who neither succeed nor fail, but organize their lives to maintain an external image so they appear to be much closer to success than they really are. That can become an almost all-consuming lie. Most ambitious people can't imagine going to a dinner party and answering the question about whether they are busy with a big smile and the words, "No, not at all."

Before you move on to the next chapter, reflect on these questions:

- *How do you think about what you are getting out of your ambitions today?*
- *Do you recognize the struggles of Bella, Jitesh, and Nora and Alexander?*

Clearly ambition is complex and often misunderstood and mismanaged. Many people struggle with their ambitions and end up unfulfilled despite putting in great effort. The Return on Ambition Equation serves as a starting point and challenges you to think about the type and degree of your ambitions, and the growth, well-being, and achievement return you are getting from them.

Let's move on to the next chapter and discuss your ambitions in more detail.