

Author Talks: Nicolai Tillisch on how to frame ambition (and not let it frame you)

Years of coaching leaders led to an ah-ha moment: ambition can undermine even the most successful people. The challenge is more complex than work–life balance.



In this edition of *Author Talks*, McKinsey senior editor Barbara Tierney chats with Nicolai Tillisch about his new book, *Return on Ambition: A Radical Approach to Your Achievement, Growth, and Well-Being* (Fast Company Press, January 2021). Tillisch, a McKinsey alumnus who now works with the global coaching firm Cultivating Leadership, talked about how seeing so many people struggle with achievement spurred him and his coauthor, Nicolai Chen Nielsen, to create a framework and tool kit to help them. He also spoke in personal terms about the limits of his own ambition. An edited version of the conversation follows.

What problem are you trying to solve with this book?

The problem we focused on is that too many ambitious people are working really hard without becoming as successful as they could be or sacrificing much more of their fulfillment in life than they need to.

We found that, actually, there's a lot of doubt out there. There are indications that up to half—and in some cases well beyond half—of the people we consider ambitious actually doubt whether the effort they are making is worth it. They struggle to keep everything together in their lives.

For me personally, I came into the research because I was looking at how I could help people perform. And then suddenly a whole picture opened up—that this is not just about performance. It really is holistic: you can achieve, but if you don't have growth and well-being at the same time, it will be really difficult.

What is the core concept behind 'return on ambition' and how can you measure it?

The book defines ambition as a powerful yearning and drive to attain a future state that is different from today's and challenging to reach. And that's relevant for most ambitious people. So this book can be read by somebody who just joined the firm, and it can be read by somebody who is well into their career. The way we measure this is that we simply have a formula: return on ambition equals

achievement plus growth plus well-being. And all three factors are vital.

Also, each element impacts the others. They are interdependent. So what we saw, and it's actually quite beautiful, is that when we interviewed people we considered to be successful over time and also assessed them as having fulfilling life, one of the very clear patterns is that they nurture all three factors—achievement, growth, and well-being—on an ongoing basis. On the other hand, we found so many examples, and also a ton of research, indicating that if you compromise on one of the three for a long period of time, then you will hurt the two others.

Making a choice

What are the seven 'frenemies' of ambitious people?

The seven frenemies double as the virtues of ambitious people. They are competitiveness, desire, perseverance, boldness, independence, convention, and flexibility. And what we have seen is that most ambitious people can recognize several of these in themselves.

For me personally, I have a very close relationship with perseverance and competitiveness. Going all the way back to school and academia, I would never have gotten to where I am had it not been for these friends. But down the line, they also started dominating me quite a lot, and it was very exhausting for me and also for my colleagues. And in hindsight, I sacrificed way too much with my family and friends.

So what is very clear is that these two particular frenemies—perseverance and competitiveness—have increasingly managed me. And the moment I became aware of this, I took the conscious choice to, basically, overrule my instincts and follow my intuition. You might say that my normal thought patterns, my behavioral habits, are not supporting what I'm trying to do now. And that's a huge shift. But it's possible.

‘It was very exhausting for me and also for my colleagues. And in hindsight, I sacrificed way too much with my family and friends.’

Once you decide that ambition has created an imbalance in your life, how do you set a new target?

The big disease of ambitious people is that they try to do too much. They have too many goals or equivalents to goals. They spread themselves thin. So the book counters that by distinguishing between long-lasting principles, one short-term improvement priority, and weekly intentions. The book contains a dedicated tool for each of these three.

It's not only about setting a target but also learning from that target and expanding your future capacity. And you can make this exciting and pursue it in a way that you take good care of yourself.

A big takeaway for leaders is how they think about their own ambitions and also the people who helped them achieve these ambitions. Because this is not just about those achievements. When you want people to do their absolute best over time, you need to pay attention not only to their achievements themselves.

The biggest trend right now in work is to look not at employee satisfaction but at employee life satisfaction. So you need to look at the whole picture.

Of forests and trees

What surprised you most about writing this book?

As a McKinsey alumnus, I have some beautiful techniques in problem solving! And I must admit that while working on this book, I couldn't see the forest for the trees many times. So we went through tons of scientific research to backstop our findings.

We conducted a big survey around the world. We interviewed a lot of people and did very deep interviews with a collection of very ambitious people. And we ended up reconceptualizing the book twice. We threw out hundreds of pages of draft manuscript.

So the big surprise for me is that this ended up being such a nice little elegant system, with one return-on-ambition equation, seven frenemies, and four tools. So you can say the book didn't end up actually being a forest, but much more of a well-composed baroque garden.

Nicolai Tillisch is the regional partner of the Leadership Circle. **Barbara Tierney**, based in McKinsey's New York office, is a senior editor of McKinsey Global Publishing.

Designed by McKinsey Global Publishing
Copyright © 2021 McKinsey & Company. All rights reserved.