**[Ambition: Why Some People Are Most Likely to Succeed By Jeffrey Kluger](https://wirelessyogi1.wordpress.com/2010/09/05/ambition-why-some-people-are-most-likely-to-succeed-by-jeffrey-kluger/)**

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You don't get as successful as Gregg and Drew Shipp by accident. Shake
hands with the 36-year-old fraternal twins who co-own the sprawling Hi
Fi Personal Fitness club in Chicago, and it's clear you're in the
presence of people who thrive on their drive. But that wasn't always
the case. The twins' father founded the Jovan perfume company, a
glamorous business that spun off the kinds of glamorous profits that
made it possible for the Shipps to amble through high school, coast
into college and never much worry about getting the rent paid or
keeping the fridge filled. But before they graduated, their sense of
drift began to trouble them. At about the same time, their father sold
off the company, and with it went the cozy billets in adult life that
had always served as an emotional backstop for the boys.

That did it. By the time they got out of school, both Shipps had
entirely transformed themselves, changing from boys who might have
grown up to live off the family's wealth to men consumed with going
out and creating their own. "At this point," says Gregg, "I consider
myself to be almost maniacally ambitious." (See a TIME photo-essay on
high achievers.)

It shows. In 1998 the brothers went into the gym trade. They spotted a
modest health club doing a modest business, bought out the owner and
transformed the place into a luxury facility where private trainers
could reserve space for top-dollar clients. In the years since, the
company has outgrown one building, then another, and the brothers are
about to move a third time. Gregg, a communications major at college,
manages the club's clients, while Drew, a business major, oversees the
more hardheaded chore of finance and expansion. "We're not sitting
still," Drew says. "Even now that we're doing twice the business we
did at our old place, there's a thirst that needs to be quenched."

Why is that? Why are some people born with a fire in the belly, while
others — like the Shipps — need something to get their pilot light
lit? And why do others never get the flame of ambition going? Is there
a family anywhere that doesn't have its overachievers and
underachievers — its Jimmy Carters and Billy Carters, its Jeb Bushes
and Neil Bushes — and find itself wondering how they all could have
come splashing out of exactly the same gene pool?

Of all the impulses in humanity's behavioral portfolio, ambition —
that need to grab an ever bigger piece of the resource pie before
someone else gets it — ought to be one of the most democratically
distributed. Nature is a zero-sum game, after all. Every buffalo you
kill for your family is one less for somebody else's; every acre of
land you occupy elbows out somebody else. Given that, the need to get
ahead ought to be hard-wired into all of us equally. (See the best
pictures of 2009.)

And yet it's not. For every person consumed with the need to achieve,
there's someone content to accept whatever life brings. For everyone
who chooses the 80-hour workweek, there's someone punching out at 5.
Men and women — so it's said — express ambition differently; so do
Americans and Europeans, baby boomers and Gen Xers, the middle class
and the well-to-do. Even among the manifestly motivated, there are
degrees of ambition. Steve Wozniak co-founded Apple Computer and then
left the company in 1985 as a 34-year-old multimillionaire. His
partner, Steve Jobs, is still innovating at Apple and moonlighting at
his second blockbuster company, Pixar Animation Studios.

Not only do we struggle to understand why some people seem to have
more ambition than others, but we can't even agree on just what
ambition is. "Ambition is an evolutionary product," says
anthropologist Edward Lowe at Soka University of America, in Aliso
Viejo, Calif. "No matter how social status is defined, there are
certain people in every community who aggressively pursue it and
others who aren't so aggressive."

Dean Simonton, a psychologist at the University of California, Davis,
who studies genius, creativity and eccentricity, believes it's more
complicated than that. "Ambition is energy and determination," he
says. "But it calls for goals too. People with goals but no energy are
the ones who wind up sitting on the couch saying 'One day I'm going to
build a better mousetrap.' People with energy but no clear goals just
dissipate themselves in one desultory project after the next." (See
the top 10 everything of 2009.)

Assuming you've got drive, dreams and skill, is all ambition equal? Is
the overworked lawyer on the partner track any more ambitious than the
overworked parent on the mommy track? Is the successful musician to
whom melody comes naturally more driven than the unsuccessful one who
sweats out every note? We may listen to Mozart, but should we applaud
Salieri?

Most troubling of all, what about when enough ambition becomes way too
much? Grand dreams unmoored from morals are the stuff of tyrants — or
at least of Enron. The 16-hour workday filled with high stress and
at-the-desk meals is the stuff of burnout and heart attacks. Even
among kids, too much ambition quickly starts to do real harm. In a
just completed study, anthropologist Peter Demerath of Ohio State
University surveyed 600 students at a high-achieving high school where
most of the kids are triple-booked with advanced-placement courses,
sports and after-school jobs. About 70% of them reported that they
were starting to feel stress some or all of the time. "I asked one boy
how his parents react to his workload, and he answered, 'I don't
really get home that often,'" says Demerath. "Then he handed me his
business card from the video store where he works."

Anthropologists, psychologists and others have begun looking more
closely at these issues, seeking the roots of ambition in family,
culture, gender, genes and more. They have by no means thrown the
curtain all the way back, but they have begun to part it. "It's
fundamentally human to be prestige conscious," says Soka's Lowe. "It's
not enough just to be fed and housed. People want more."

If humans are an ambitious species, it's clear we're not the only one.
Many animals are known to signal their ambitious tendencies almost
from birth. Even before wolf pups are weaned, they begin sorting
themselves out into alphas and all the others. The alphas are quicker,
more curious, greedier for space, milk, Mom — and they stay that way
for life. Alpha wolves wander widely, breed annually and may live to a
geriatric 10 or 11 years old. Lower-ranking wolves enjoy none of these
benefits — staying close to home, breeding rarely and usually dying
before they're 4.

Humans often report the same kind of temperamental determinism.
Families are full of stories of the inexhaustible infant who grew up
to be an entrepreneur, the phlegmatic child who never really showed
much go. But if it's genes that run the show, what accounts for the
Shipps, who didn't bestir themselves until the cusp of adulthood? And
what, more tellingly, explains identical twins — precise genetic
templates of each other who ought to be temperamentally identical but
often exhibit profound differences in the octane of their ambition?
(See TIME's Wellness blog.)

Ongoing studies of identical twins have measured achievement
motivation — lab language for ambition — in identical siblings
separated at birth, and found that each twin's profile overlaps 30% to
50% of the other's. In genetic terms, that's an awful lot — "a
benchmark for heritability," says geneticist Dean Hamer of the
National Cancer Institute. But that still leaves a great deal that can
be determined by experiences in infancy, subsequent upbringing and
countless other imponderables.

Some of those variables may be found by studying the function of the
brain. At Washington University, researchers have been conducting
brain imaging to investigate a trait they call persistence — the
ability to stay focused on a task until it's completed just so — which
they consider one of the critical engines driving ambition.

The researchers recruited a sample group of students and gave each a
questionnaire designed to measure persistence level. Then they
presented the students with a task — identifying sets of pictures as
either pleasant or unpleasant and taken either indoors or outdoors —
while conducting magnetic resonance imaging of their brains. The
nature of the task was unimportant, but how strongly the subjects felt
about performing it well — and where in the brain that feeling was
processed — could say a lot. In general, the researchers found that
students who scored highest in persistence had the greatest activity
in the limbic region, the area of the brain related to emotions and
habits. "The correlation was .8 [or 80%]," says professor of
psychiatry Robert Cloninger, one of the investigators. "That's as good
as you can get."

It's impossible to say whether innate differences in the brain were
driving the ambitious behavior or whether learned behavior was causing
the limbic to light up. But a number of researchers believe it's
possible for the nonambitious to jump-start their drive, provided the
right jolt comes along. "Energy level may be genetic," says
psychologist Simonton, "but a lot of times it's just finding the right
thing to be ambitious about." Simonton and others often cite the case
of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who might not have been the same President
he became — or even become President at all — had his disabling polio
not taught him valuable lessons about patience and tenacity.

Is such an epiphany possible for all of us, or are some people immune
to this kind of lightning? Are there individuals or whole groups for
whom the amplitude of ambition is simply lower than it is for others?
It's a question — sometimes a charge — that hangs at the edges of all
discussions about gender and work, about whether women really have the
meat-eating temperament to survive in the professional world. Both
research findings and everyday experience suggest that women's
ambitions express themselves differently from men's. The meaning of
that difference is the hinge on which the arguments turn. (See the top
10 medical breakthroughs of 2009.)

Economists Lise Vesterlund of the University of Pittsburgh and Muriel
Niederle of Stanford University conducted a study in which they
assembled 40 men and 40 women, gave them five minutes to add up as
many two-digit numbers as they could, and paid them 50¢ for each
correct answer. The subjects were not competing against one another
but simply playing against the house. Later, the game was changed to a
tournament in which the subjects were divided into teams of two men or
two women each. Winning teams got $2 per computation; losers got
nothing. Men and women performed equally in both tests, but on the
third round, when asked to choose which of the two ways they wanted to
play, only 35% of the women opted for the tournament format; 75% of
the men did.

"Men and women just differ in their appetite for competition," says
Vesterlund. "There seems to be a dislike for it among women and a
preference among men."

To old-line employers of the old-boy school, this sounds like just one
more reason to keep the glass ceiling polished. But other behavioral
experts think Vesterlund's conclusions go too far. They say it's not
that women aren't ambitious enough to compete for what they want; it's
that they're more selective about when they engage in competition;
they're willing to get ahead at high cost but not at any cost.
"Primate-wide, males are more directly competitive than females, and
that makes sense," says Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, emeritus professor of
anthropology at the University of California, Davis. "But that's not
the same as saying women aren't innately competitive too." (See the
world's most influential people in the 2009 TIME 100.)

As with so much viewed through the lens of anthropology, the roots of
these differences lie in animal and human mating strategies. Males are
built to go for quick, competitive reproductive hits and move on.
Women are built for the it-takes-a-village life, in which they provide
long-term care to a very few young and must sail them safely into an
often hostile world. Among some of our evolutionary kin — baboons,
macaques and other old-world monkeys — this can be especially tricky
since young females inherit their mother's social rank. The mothers
must thus operate the levers of society deftly so as to raise both
their own position and, eventually, their daughters'. If you think
that kind of ambition-by-proxy doesn't translate to humans, Hrdy
argues, think again. "Just read an Edith Wharton novel about women in
old New York competing for marriage potential for their daughters,"
she says.

Import such tendencies into the 21st century workplace, and you get
women who are plenty able to compete ferociously but are inclined to
do it in teams and to split the difference if they don't get
everything they want. And mothers who appear to be unwilling to strive
and quit the workplace altogether to go raise their kids? Hrdy
believes they're competing for the most enduring stakes of all,
putting aside their near-term goals to ensure the long-term success of
their line. Robin Parker, 46, a campaign organizer who in 1980 was
already on the presidential stump with Senator Edward Kennedy, was
precisely the kind of lifetime pol who one day finds herself in the
West Wing. But in 1992, at the very moment a President of her party
was returning to the White House and she might have snagged a plum
Washington job, she decamped from the capital, moved to Boston with
her family and became a full-time mom to her two sons.

"Being out in the world became a lot less important to me," she says.
"I used to worry about getting Presidents elected, and I'm still an
incredibly ambitious person. But what I want to succeed at now is
managing my family, raising my boys, helping my husband and the
community. In 10 years, when the boys are launched, who knows what
I'll be doing? But for now, I have my world."

But even if something as primal as the reproductive impulse wires you
one way, it's possible for other things to rewire you completely. Two
of the biggest influences on your level of ambition are the family
that produced you and the culture that produced your family.

There are no hard rules for the kinds of families that turn out the
highest achievers. Most psychologists agree that parents who set tough
but realistic challenges, applaud successes and go easy on failures
produce kids with the greatest self-confidence.

What's harder for parents to control but has perhaps as great an
effect is the level of privilege into which their kids are born. Just
how wealth or poverty influences drive is difficult to predict. Grow
up in a rich family, and you can inherit either the tools to achieve
(think both Presidents Bush) or the indolence of the aristocrat. Grow
up poor, and you can come away with either the motivation to strive
(think Bill Clinton) or the inertia of the hopeless. On the whole,
studies suggest it's the upper middle class that produces the greatest
proportion of ambitious people — mostly because it also produces the
greatest proportion of anxious people.

When measuring ambition, anthropologists divide families into four
categories: poor, struggling but getting by, upper middle class, and
rich. For members of the first two groups, who are fighting just to
keep the electricity on and the phone bill paid, ambition is often a
luxury. For the rich, it's often unnecessary. It's members of the
upper middle class, reasonably safe economically but not so safe that
a bad break couldn't spell catastrophe, who are most driven to improve
their lot. "It's called status anxiety," says anthropologist Lowe,
"and whether you're born to be concerned about it or not, you do
develop it."

But some societies make you more anxious than others. The U.S. has
always been a me-first culture, as befits a nation that grew from a
scattering of people on a fat saddle of continent where land was often
given away. That have-it-all ethos persists today, even though the
resource freebies are long since gone. Other countries — where the
acreage is smaller and the pickings are slimmer — came of age
differently, with the need to cooperate getting etched into the
cultural DNA. The American model has produced wealth, but it has come
at a price — with ambition sometimes turning back on the ambitious and
consuming them whole.

The study of high-achieving high school students conducted by Ohio
State's Demerath was noteworthy for more than the stress he found the
students were suffering. It also revealed the lengths to which the
kids and their parents were willing to go to gain an advantage over
other suffering students. Cheating was common, and most students
shrugged it off as only a minor problem. A number of parents — some of
whose children carried a 4.0 average — sought to have their kids
classified as special-education students, which would entitle them to
extra time on standardized tests. "Kids develop their own moral code,"
says Demerath. "They have a keen sense of competing with others and
are developing identities geared to that."

Demerath got very different results when he conducted research in a
very different place — Papua, New Guinea. In the mid-1990s, he spent a
year in a small village there, observing how the children learned.
Usually, he found, they saw school as a noncompetitive place where it
was important to succeed collectively and then move on. Succeeding at
the expense of others was seen as a form of vanity that the New
Guineans call "acting extra." Says Demerath: "This is an odd thing for
them."

That makes tactical sense. In a country based on farming and fishing,
you need to know that if you get sick and can't work your field or
cast your net, someone else will do it for you. Putting on airs in the
classroom is not the way to ensure that will happen.

Of course, once a collectivist not always a collectivist. Marcelo
Suárez-Orozco, a professor of globalization and education at New York
University, has been following 400 families that immigrated to the
U.S. from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Many hailed from
villages where the American culture of competition is alien, but once
they got here, they changed fast.

As a group, the immigrant children in his study are outperforming
their U.S.-born peers. What's more, the adults are dramatically
outperforming the immigrant families that came before them. "One
hundred years ago, it took people two to three generations to achieve
a middle-class standard of living," says Suárez-Orozco. "Today they're
getting there within a generation."

So this is a good thing, right? Striving people come here to succeed —
and do. While there are plenty of benefits that undeniably come with
learning the ways of ambition, there are plenty of perils too — many a
lot uglier than high school students cheating on the trig final.

Human history has always been writ in the blood of broken alliances,
palace purges and strong people or nations beating up on weak ones —
all in the service of someone's hunger for power or resources.
"There's a point at which you find an interesting kind of nerve
circuitry between optimism and hubris," says Warren Bennis, a
professor of business administration at the University of Southern
California and the author of three books on leadership. "It becomes an
arrogance or conceit, an inability to live without power."

While most ambitious people keep their secret Caesar tucked safely
away, it can emerge surprisingly, even suddenly. Says Frans de Waal, a
primatologist at the Yerkes Primate Center in Atlanta and the author
of a new book, Our Inner Ape: "You can have a male chimp that is the
most laid-back character, but one day he sees the chance to overthrow
the leader and becomes a totally different male. I would say 90% of
people would behave this way too. On an island with three people, they
might become a little dictator."

But a yearning for supremacy can create its own set of problems. Heart
attacks, ulcers and other stress-related ills are more common among
high achievers — and that includes nonhuman achievers. The blood of
alpha wolves routinely shows elevated levels of cortisol, the same
stress hormone that is found in anxious humans. Alpha chimps even
suffer ulcers and occasional heart attacks.

For these reasons, people and animals who have an appetite for
becoming an alpha often settle contentedly into life as a beta. "The
desire to be in a high position is universal," says de Waal. "But that
trait has co-evolved with another skill — the skill to make the best
of lower positions."

Humans not only make peace with their beta roles but they also make
money from them. Among corporations, an increasingly well-rewarded
portion of the workforce is made up of B players, managers and
professionals somewhere below the top tier. They don't do the power
lunching and ribbon cutting but instead perform the highly skilled,
everyday work of making the company run. As skeptical shareholders
look ever more askance at overpaid corporate A-listers, the B players
are becoming more highly valued. It's an adaptation that serves the
needs of both the corporation and the culture around it. "Everyone has
ambition," says Lowe. "Societies have to provide alternative ways for
people to achieve."

Ultimately, it's that very flexibility — that multiplicity of possible
rewards — that makes dreaming big dreams and pursuing big goals worth
all the bother. Ambition is an expensive impulse, one that requires an
enormous investment of emotional capital. Like any investment, it can
pay off in countless different kinds of coin. The trick, as any good
speculator will tell you, is recognizing the riches when they come
your way.

— With reporting by Dan Cray / Los Angeles and Eric Ferkenhoff, Noah
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