**[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  
Isackson and Leslie Whitaker / Chicago

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