

The ABCs of Work: Ambition

Law Department Management

Career Development



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Is there a formula for success at work? Are there simple rules that you can follow to increase your chances of getting what you want? Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau thinks the answer is yes. In this series of articles, *The ABCs of Work*, he shares the formula with you.

Greetings readers and congratulations! Simply by virtue of being here you are already on the path to increasing your odds of success. While luck plays a gigantic role in life, that does not mean you are helpless to control your fate. If you want to think of it this way, the tips we'll explore are ways to increase your odds that luck will find you.

We start with **Ambition**.

Ambition here does not mean your desire to get a promotion, make more money, or any other career

goal you no doubt have. I am using ambition in the sense that you *desire to get better*.

It helps if your desire to improve is intrinsic, something you do because it's part of your personal values, not because you feel external pressure, or because anyone is watching. If your ambition is essential to your character, it will consistently guide your behavior.



Chase not ambition for its own glory, but strive for excellence in character and action, for these lie within your power. Artwork by ronstik / *Shutterstock.com*

But you can reap the benefits of ambition even if it doesn't come naturally to you. You will need to spend time actively thinking about your desire to improve and reminding yourself why you are striving towards the goals you have set. You won't need to prod yourself for too long, though, before your focus on self-improvement becomes a habit.

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Using reminders, rewards, and repetition for just a few weeks can turn many practices into reliable habits. Habits take much less energy to maintain than they do to create. Once you've made thinking about your ambition into a habit, your desire to improve will become intrinsic, for all practical purposes.

The benefits of ambition

What happens when you are a person who feels ambitious? Well, for one thing, you become much more focused on the process of your work than just the outcome. That is, you become aware of the time you spend on tasks, and whether that time is wasted or well-spent. Because you want to improve, you spend time eliminating inefficiencies, even if this means you initially take more time to redesign processes.

When you hew to an improvement mindset, you also become aware of how others' behavior affects your productivity. Other people's competence, or lack thereof, affects you. As does their openness, responsiveness, and reliability.

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By recognizing the impact of others' competence on you, you are likely to become committed to improving your own. This is ambition (the desire for improvement) serving as self-reinforcement. As we shall see in this series, success begets success. The more you work on your own improvement, the better you perform.

You also focus on the quality of your work. You realize that small features often distinguish work products. Your business colleagues are probably not able to substantively evaluate your legal advice. But they are still evaluating your performance. How do your business colleagues judge your contributions?

- Can they understand what you're saying (i.e., do you write clearly, in plain language)? (See The Day You Became Smarter.)
- Does your work product look professional in that it is well-formatted and typo-free, with headings and sub-headings (which can translate to "Can I trust you because you demonstrate attention to detail?")?
- Have you answered their question and answered it timely (Are you responsive, in both substance and process)?
- Do you anticipate additional questions they did not ask but should have (Are you thoughtful and helpful?)
- Does your advice enable them to move forward (are you competent in a busy savvy way)?

If you can cultivate the ambition to improve your performance generally, this ambition is likely to benefit your work broadly and in unexpected ways, because the mindset becomes a tool you bring to every task. Thus, it is appropriate we start with Ambition as the foundational factor that will increase your chances of success.

Honorable mentions

Leveraging a single tip to drive work success is a heavy lift, even a tip as important as ambition. Our formula will necessarily be incomplete. But the formula has impact, and more so because we've kept things simple. Here, to finish, are some honorable mention tips to serve as food for thought:

Aptitude — Do you know what you're really good at? It is powerful to leverage your strengths. More useful, in fact, than trying to improve your weaknesses. Pick a few areas and become a superstar.

Attitude — Keeping a positive attitude when times are tough makes you stand out. Most people let stress make them miserable, which rubs off on the people around them. Staying happy in the face of

adversity makes you a valued colleague indeed.

Be well.

Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

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James Bellerjeau



Lecturer

University of Zurich

James Bellerjeau is a lecturer in the LLM program of the University of Zürich and for the Europa Institut of the University of Zürich.

Bellerjeau served for two decades as group general counsel for Mettler-Toledo International Inc., an S&P 500 company with its worldwide headquarters in Greifensee, Switzerland. He then led Mettler-Toledo's global Sustainability program for several years through June 2021.

Bellerjeau shares thoughts on how to live a good life at Klugne. You can also follow him on LinkedIn.