

APATHY, AMBITION¹, AND SELFISHNESS STORIES²

How to Use These Stories

Leadership begins when people exhibit virtues with excellence. Virtues are standards of moral behavior, such as courage, integrity, kindness, and humility. This document focuses on the virtue of ambition. When we lead with exceptional ambition, we feel deeper satisfaction over what we accomplish, we help and benefit others, and we improve the world around us.

Like all virtues, too much or too little of a virtue is a vice. Thus, when leaders are not ambitious enough, people may stop improving and lose interest in their work. When leaders are too ambitious, people may become distrustful of their leaders and produce lower quality work.

Leading with exceptional ambition is often difficult. It is difficult to find the optimal expression of ambition between apathy and selfishness. It is difficult because an ambitious action in one situation is not an ambitious action in another situation. It is difficult because the people who care about a situation often disagree about the best way to exhibit ambition, and in many of these cases each person—including you—will be partially right and partially wrong, and we need to learn from each other and work through conflict to sort this out. Even when you figure out how to exhibit exceptional ambition, it is also important to communicate what you are doing to others so that they will understand what you are doing.

This document contains stories of people being ambitious and of failing to be ambitious. (The titles next to people's names are their titles at the time the story occurred and may not be their title currently.) Discussing diverse situations in which people failed or succeeded to live up to their values often helps people to recognize and act on other opportunities when they arise. By discussing these stories in meetings, on teams, over internet or intranet forums, or in classrooms, groups can come up with ideas for leading with exceptional ambition, learn each other's perspectives, work through disagreements, and generate ideas. For example, you might read and discuss one story at the beginning of a weekly meeting, post a story on a team forum and ask people to share their thoughts, begin a work shift by discussing a story, use a story in a town hall meeting, or use the stories as fodder for discussion in classroom settings. The following questions may be helpful in discussing the stories. Choose whichever questions are most helpful for your group.

¹ In addition to being used to foster discussions about the virtue of ambition, these stories may also be used for discussions about aspiration, drive, hope, initiative, and proactivity.

² The stories in this document were written or told by the protagonists. Ryan Quinn edited them and added the reflection questions. The stories are to be used as the basis for class discussion, and not to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of a particular situation. Some protagonists agreed to use their real name, others asked for us to use a pseudonym. The goals of this document include becoming aware of issues, identifying the benefits and drawbacks of taking different approaches, assessing their impact on outcome(s), and learning ways of addressing situations you may encounter in the future.

1. What, if anything, did people do in this story that was ambitious?
2. How could the people in this story have been more ambitious? How could they have been exceptionally ambitious?
3. How might some experiences from your own life be similar to this story?
4. What inspires or elevates you about this story?
5. What disappoints or angers you about this story?
6. What might you have done in this story to overcome your disappointment or anger and help the person who disappointed or angered you to do better?
7. What caused the people in this story to behave the way they did?
8. Who in this discussion disagrees with you? What could you do to understand this person's point of view?
9. How might your perspective on this story be wrong?
10. What ideas can you take from this story and discussion to apply in your own life?

Story #1: Salali Tallchief, Director

I spent three months trying to remediate findings from an audit with our largest customer. At one point, I recognized that one of the teams assigned to this work was struggling and needed a leader from the core team to serve as a champion for them. I decided to take on that role.

I scheduled a meeting with the program manager and reached out to key stakeholders to gather as much information as I could. As I did, it became clear that everyone on the team recognized the importance of the work, but they all felt that the timeline required to complete their work was unrealistic. They did not believe they would succeed, and their concerns were legitimate. No matter how impossible it seemed, however, we had to hit these objectives. I knew there would be no chance of them doing so unless they focused on possibilities rather than problems.

I held many meetings with the team about their challenges. During one meeting with the program manager, I could tell from her verbal and nonverbal cues that she did not understand why we even needed to meet the deadline. Once I recognized this, I stopped talking about the project and instead asked her how she was feeling. She really opened up and let me know how she was feeling. After she did, I shared my own fears with her, and also shared more background information to explain why this work was so important. No one had previously provided this information to her. She thanked me for taking the time to share this information, and this conversation was a turning point in our relationship.

As the process continued, I routinely asked members of my team the question, "What are a few strategies we could use to achieve our deadline?" This question really resonated with the team. As we returned and reflected on it again and again, we got creative and developed several scenarios of how we could fast track and parallel path many work items.

I knew my work with this team had turned a corner and believed that they could be successful when one of our business leaders called me on my way home from work one night. She started out the conversation by saying she was getting creative. Then, she shared a few new ways in which her team was planning to contribute to the work. As I listened, I was in shock. This was the team that had said that they were too busy to even start this work. I could not praise her enough and could not wait to share her successes in my core team meeting in the morning.

Story #2: Bárbara Ximénez Bruidegom, Founder Director

The first business I started was a consultancy. I had loads of small businesses asking me for advice on things they were doing. Without much focus on growth, my business grew organically for 12 to 18 months. However, I completely lacked the self-discipline needed to keep a pipeline going, or even to understand that I needed to keep a pipeline going. Whenever I had free time, I took time off instead of developing the business. Eventually, I ran out of organic clients. All of a sudden, I went from being very comfortable to having only one client, whose work allowed me to make just enough money to scrape by for the rest of the month. Failing to exhibit the discipline of working on business development when I did not have client work was a big mistake that cost me a lot of money. I learned from this experience. Business development is an ongoing process with its own metrics, and you have to work very hard to keep it going.

Story #3: Paul Jones, Founding Owner and Chief People Officer

Our company provides home care service to seniors, especially to those with disabilities and those that are recovering from surgery. The services we provide may be as simple as companionship, as complicated as personal care 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Alternatively, we may work creatively with you to come up with solutions that allow you to maintain freedom and independence in your home.

When we started this business, we tried to establish clear values. For example, we did not want to just put warm bodies into homes. Unfortunately, that happens a lot in our industry. There is high turnover and not a lot of training. Our goal is to build an extended family with our employees and customers, and as a result, we have very low turnover of our staff.

Often, in the early stages of a running a start-up business, founders learn the values they want for their organization because something happens and they think, “Let’s not do that again!” This story is one example of that.

We were contacted by a local retirement community about a client that needed our care. It was our first year as a start-up, so cash flow was a problem, revenue was lower, and we were really struggling. We often wondered if our business would work, or if we would end up failing and working at a Home Depot. We were hungry. Hungry is not always bad, but sometimes desperation can make you do stupid things, and decisions made in fear are seldom good

decisions. Therefore, when we sat down with his family, even though it felt wrong from the beginning, we ignored those uncomfortable feelings.

This family was kind of low on trust to begin with. They were very demanding in terms of schedules and expectations. Up to this point, we had tried to follow the principle that the customer is always right. We were used to demanding customers, but they were taking it to a whole new level. They would text us at 2 a.m. and created all kinds of drama. They treated us like the hired help and started sucking out every bit of our time and resources. The only reason that we did not say no was because we wanted the money.

Eventually, I had to confront the daughter. When I did, she fired us on the spot. Honestly, that is the decision that we should have made from the beginning. The whole relationship lasted about five weeks.

After that, whenever we would have our initial interviews with families, we would make sure we communicated more clearly who we are and what we do. We still listen to them, try to understand their situation, and come up with services that are tailored to their specific needs, showing maximum care for their loved ones. However, we also tell them that our goal is for our caregivers to become a part of your family. As a result, in doing this, we are committing to you for the long haul, and if you are not interested in a relationship like that, you really should not hire us. We work to earn their trust, but also create structures and boundaries to make sure that we can execute on that trust.

Story #4: Rich Berens, President

A number of years ago, one of the consultants in our consulting firm decided to proclaim to the world that he was a thought leader on the topic of customer experience and that people should hire him and pay him \$15,000 - \$20,000 per engagement to speak on that topic. He changed his title to “customer experience guru,” wrote blogs, and eventually wrote two books on the topic. He now gets those speaking engagements, leads the customer experience practice in our consulting firm, and drives our customer experience business. He just proclaimed it, built it, and made it happen. Some people proclaim things, but they do not back it up. This consultant of ours believed it, put it out there, and then he did it.

I have great admiration for him pulling that off and really reinventing himself. It makes me think there are areas in which I should do that because it accelerates your growth. Eventually, other consultants in our firm wrote books, including the one that the founder and I wrote. He inspired multiple people, and I think we probably had people thinking, “Wow, we do not write books we are not the kind of people who write books, that is what authors do.” Then our customer experience guru wrote two books, and they thought, “He’s an author. If he can write a book, I think I can write a book.” He inspired people, which moved the organization.