

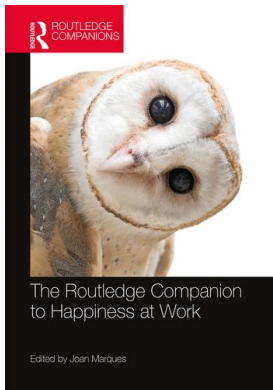
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Happiness at the Intersection of Acceptance and Ambition

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HAPPINESS AT THE INTERSECTION OF ACCEPTANCE AND AMBITION

Joan Marques

Happiness: Our Common Focus

The most common focus of all living beings is to be happy. Unfortunately, many people have come to substitute happiness with a set of stereotypical goals, such as wealth, fame, status, or power. Nonetheless, many people who actually attained those ideals would explain—or have demonstrated through their tragic life experiences—that these achievements should not be misinterpreted as manifestations of happiness. They are mere tools that can be used in a proper or improper way. Happiness is just as internal as contentment and satisfaction. Happiness is not the same as elation, because elation is a very temporary state of an emotional high. As soon as the newness of an experience is over, the elation fades away and one can fall into an even deeper depression than before. Happiness, however, is a state of mind we can find when we cease to make our wellbeing dependent upon external factors (Marques, 2016).

In a very interesting TED talk about happiness, Shawn Achor explains that we can guide our brains toward a positive mode, rather than a negative or stressed mode. Our mental state influences how we look at the things that occur in our lives: whether we feel defeated by a setback, or resiliently consider the lesson to learn and move on. It is the same mindset that nourishes contentment and long term satisfaction. Happiness is not the result of hard work that leads to more money and position and therefore “success” (Caprino, 2013). Happiness is not a consequence of actions, but an inner state that we can develop. Happiness is the foundation of our success, as it triggers inspirations in our brains, and propels us into engaging in fulfilling activities.

Now that we have landed at the inspirations in our brains, it may be prudent to review two major triggers that can either disrupt our sense of happiness, or safeguard it over a long period of time. However, it all depends on how we manage these triggers. One is ambition, and the other is acceptance. At an initial confrontation with these two phenomena, they may strike the reader as contradictory, yet, as we progress through this chapter, we may shift our paradigm and start perceiving them as valuable counterparts, of which a balance can lead to a true and lasting “happy medium”.

Ambition: A Critical Quality toward Progress

The only way that we can achieve anything from doing nothing is if we are independently wealthy, or have benefactors that are. Most working people understand the importance of being driven toward excellence, and the importance of nurturing creativity, design thinking, and an entrepreneurial spirit as

elements of ambitious performance and ongoing progress. Ambition has been studied in scholarly and vocational circles for multiple decades, and has brought some interesting findings to light. It has been defined in many ways, and the essence of most of these definitions can be summarized as follows.

Ambition has been described as “the unique human energy that primes our efforts and shapes our achievements” (Champy & Nohria, 2001). While ambition is usually perceived as a tool that can drive us to higher planes in life, it is not always seen as a positive trait. The philosophers that have studied ambition over time were on average more negative than positive about it. Even in more recent times, ambition has been profiled as an attribute to be cautious with. Former U.S. President Barack Obama, for instance, warned that we display a poverty of ambition if we only use this trait to achieve material and monetary success without deeper intention (Obama, 2009).

Ambition emerges on the basis of our personal characteristics and our view of the world (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). An ambitious person is usually keen on attaining a high level of education, a prestigious job, and a lavish income. The desire within ambitious people to attain a high level of education can be explained by the fact that education is generally perceived as the roadmap to a great career, and, thus, high social status and a high income. In modern society, prestige is often measured by the years of schooling a person had: the more and the higher the degrees, the greater the chance of being considered more accomplished. Similarly, the desire of ambitious people to find a prestigious job can be explained by the fact that holding such a job generally earns admiration and an elevated status, while it also safeguards a high income. The desire of ambitious people to earn a high income, finally, can be explained in many societies, and, definitely in the U.S., as a way to be distinguished from others, and be seen as more successful (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012).

Ambitious people strive consistently, which makes it difficult to figure out what their goals really are, because these goals change over time and therefore are almost impossible to define. Ambition should also not be confused with conscientiousness or achievement orientation. While conscientiousness brings along behaviors such as reliability, devotion, and organization, ambition focuses more on end results. A person who is conscientious or achievement oriented aims to attain mastery in the activity of his or her focus, and will perform well regardless of recognition or rewards, while an ambitious person aims to attain a reward, most likely one in an explicit form such as promotion, increase in income, or attainment of power (McClelland, 1961).

As the above may already imply, many people who substitute happiness with wealth, power, or fame may use their ambition to realize these targets, in hope, or possibly even with deep-rooted conviction, that they will be happy once they accomplished their goal.

Ambition: The Spirit of Progress

Ambition is the fuel that sets our internal engine into gear, especially when it comes to professional performance. Without ambition, progress will only happen if you are fortunate enough to inherit wealth or status, or to have a mentor who keeps dragging you along. In both of these cases, ongoing progress may not last without any motivation. Ambition is a valuable quality in climbing the career ladder, or staying on top once you reached the height you were aiming for. Ambitious people see opportunities where others see challenges, and they continuously try to expand their skills and connections in order to convert these opportunities into reality. Ambition is therefore closely related to an entrepreneurial spirit, because entrepreneurs are also in the business of continuously finding or creating ways to succeed (Marques, 2016).

Ambitious people don't want to be followers for long. Their minds are always seeking ways to break through barriers and ceilings. They participate actively in projects, but do so with a mindset of inventiveness. In other words, they examine the practices and processes they are involved in, eager to find weaknesses they can improve, connections they can establish, or specific niches they can

zoom into. They are passionate and take initiative. They don't shun doing things others avoid, because they are aware that "crappy" chores sometimes harbor golden opportunities.

The difference between ambitious and complacent people is that the ambitious ones are determined to move ahead, while the complacent ones are okay with where they are at. Furthermore, ambitious people fulfill their tasks with a curiosity that drives them to look for continuous self-improvement and outperform others, while complacent people just fulfill their duties and have no further thoughts in doing so. Ambitious people are proactive: they will often come up with suggestions about new ways of doing things. Complacent people, on the other hand, rarely wonder about what could be changed. In fact, complacent people abhor change, because it may require having to learn something new and moving out of a comfort zone, so they will stay away from, or keep quiet about, any proactive way of instigating change (Marques, 2016).

What Makes Ambition a Good Characteristic?

A longitudinal study demonstrated that ambitious people are generally not miserable from or victimized by this trait, which indicates that they could control their ambition if they wanted to. Ambitious people achieve more in the areas of education and professional performance: they hold higher degrees and better jobs, and thanks to that, they feel more satisfied with their lives (Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012).

Ambition and Critical Thinking. Ambition can be a great instigator of critical thinking, because people who are ambitious are always on the look for ways to progress. In doing so, they have to develop mental strategies to move from one stage to another. In the process they may encounter unforeseen obstacles, which will cause them to change their initial plans, and engage in the creative process of exploring alternatives. Critical and creative thinking are frequent companions in the lives of ambitious persons.

Ambition, Motivation, and Goal Attainment. Ambition is a great motivator by itself. It is frequently described as a driving force in formulating and accomplishing goals. Ambitious people often envision extrinsic motivators when they set goals for themselves: a promotion, a raise, a degree, a higher status, or more power, for instance. Yet at the core of it all lies the intrinsic motivation of achievement: the attainment of each goal is a victory in itself, an inner-feeling of accomplishment and self-actualization that only the ambitious person feels. It also needs to be understood that each goal, as well as the strategies to attain it, is not set by anyone else but the ambitious person. He or she determines what the next target should be, the way this will be approached, and the possible creative changes that will have to be applied toward fruition (Marques, 2016).

Where Ambition Goes Awry

Ambition can thrust you forward to a target that is always moving into the distance. Having reached an initial goal, ambition will soon look beyond the achievement and find another point in the distance to concentrate on. On one hand, this can be seen as a great trait, because you will probably end up much further than you initially thought you would. Yet it can be draining as well, because satisfaction is non-existent in the life of a highly ambitious person. There is always the next tread on the ladder to climb up to. Sometimes, ambition is just there, and the focus is lost. There is this deep, burning desire to do something great, but it is as if your vision is blurred. Experiencing ambition without a focus is even worse than having an initial focus, accomplishing it, and moving forward to the next in a continuous, unending cycle. In the following sections, some critical personal and professional flaws in ambition are discussed.

Personal Setbacks. Merely being ambitious is not a guarantee for success in life. In order to be fruitful and rewarding, ambition needs to be clearly aligned to the aspirations of a person.

This becomes abundantly clear in young adulthood. A longitudinal study with about 6,500 adolescent respondents in the UK yielded that those who had a clear focus about the education they needed to realize their aspirations achieved their goals with more ease (Sabates, Harris, & Staff, 2011). Conversely, youngsters who had no clear focus in their ambition and thus either underestimated their education, or were unsure about their career focus, were far less successful in finding employment or establishing a clear path in the future (Sabates et al., 2011). Finally, the study found that those with a clear focus in their ambition also made more money in their career than those who lacked a sense of alignment in ambition during their adolescent years (Sabates et al., 2011).

There is one important take-away from the above: ambition needs a focus, otherwise it becomes wasted energy, which leads to wasted time and wasted money.

A factor that should never be underestimated in regards to ambition is workaholism. Workaholism is often a consequence of ambition. The critical issue with workaholism is that it is so common, and seemingly inevitable when climbing the career ladder. Yet, workaholism has a tendency to increase, consistently demanding more work focus and less relax and family time, thus resulting in psychosomatic symptoms, as mentioned earlier: strokes, heart attacks, nervous breakdowns, and more, as well as alienation from loved ones.

What makes workaholism so complicated is the fact that it begins with a great sense of accomplishment, but gradually transforms into an addictive pattern that is just hard to break, not only because of the guilt a workaholic feels when not working, but maybe even more because of the rewards this trait yields to one's ambition. A workaholic is praised, because he or she works harder than others, and therefore gets more done, so in comparison, this person tops colleagues easily. A workaholic usually harbors one or more of the following foundational factors: low self-esteem, a great need for accomplishment, coming from a family that promoted work addiction, working in a place where workaholism is valued or where competition is high, and feeling more secure at work than in other life areas (Marques, 2016).

Workaholism has also been linked to narcissism. When narcissism is moderate, it is not necessarily a bad trait, because it urges to achieve and thus receive praise, make progress, and become more confident at work. Yet, like all things in life, narcissism can also be driven to a point where it becomes excessive, fed by insatiable ambition, and translated into a continuous desire to earn rewards and recognition. This is where workaholism appears on the horizon, because earning rewards and recognition requires greater effort than others (Andreassen et al., 2012).

It seems that many of the here cited sources agree that ambition frequently comes at the price of diminished or entirely lost happiness. This may have already become apparent in the sections above: if you want to achieve something, but don't exactly know what because you have no focus, you just move without a purpose, and that will make you unhappy. If you do have determination and focus, but allow your ambition to run away with you, you get dragged from one achievement to another without any sense of real satisfaction, and this will make you unhappy. If you continue to chase status, power, and money, far beyond what you may have envisioned when you started, yet cannot stop, you have also become a victim of your ambition and lost touch with your happiness. If your health, or the health of those around you, is imperiled by your ambitious actions, and you suffer from psychosomatic ailments, your happiness is also tremendously affected. If all you can think of is your work, and everything or everybody else has lost significance due to your ambitious quest, you may achieve great things, but your happiness will be lost.

It may not be the most comfortable thing to do, but ambitious people would definitely benefit from spending some quite time in contemplation about what they are after, thereby consciously questioning whether this goal will make them happy. Ambition—and this has been proven by research—often comes at the expense of close relationships (Stillman, 2013). So, while ambitious people may end up with better positions, incomes, and social status, they are not necessarily happier or more satisfied in life than their less ambitious peers. Besides, positions and status are temporary

phenomena: they come and go. Invariably, someone else will take over your honorary spot when your energy starts fading, and finding yourself slipping down the same ladder that you once climbed is a pretty crushing feeling. Before giving in to an ambitious endeavor, it might be good to consider all possible consequences, and most importantly, the sacrifices this endeavor will demand on your happiness, because short term success is frequently followed by long term regret (Stillman, 2013).

Professional Setbacks. If you work or live with other people, they can get seriously affected by the side-effects of your excessive ambitious nature at work. Some examples of professional setbacks in ambition:

- Intolerance. Ambitious people often display a low tolerance for the people around them. They work harder than others, and if they are in charge, they will most likely expect the same from those around them. This can lead to intolerance and impatience when they encounter others that don't take the tasks as seriously as they do. As a result, they may distance themselves from these lower performers, maneuvering them into an "out-group" position, whereas those that match or follow their ambitious targets are elevated into the "in-group".
- Micro-management and Excessive Control. Because ambitious leaders want to secure progress, and do so in a swift and effective way, they may have a tendency to micro-manage their co-workers. The deep-rooted motive hereby is their discomfort and mistrust in the capacities of others to do the job as excellently as they do. While they realize that they cannot possibly do everything alone, they will delegate tasks and responsibilities, but look over other's shoulders as hard and as often as they can, to monitor the process in the way they perceive as the correct one. In doing so, they curtail co-workers' creativity and self-esteem, and increase dissatisfaction within these co-workers.
- Increased dissatisfaction. Because we are all different, driven by a multitude of motives, insights, beliefs, and values, we see the world and what we expect from it differently as well. Working with an excessively ambitious leader can have a very stressful, sometimes downright dissatisfying effect on co-workers, especially if they don't share the degree of affiliation with or passion about the goal that the leader aims to achieve. Some co-workers may consider the goal senseless, or threatening to their job security, and may try to contest it where possible. Others may agree with the leader's target, but not with his or her path toward achieving the target. They may feel that the leader moves too fast, or uses a strategy that is less desirable in their mind. Yet others may be indifferent to the leader's purpose, as they either just see their job as a source of income, or have been contrived to the out-group.
- Damaged Trust and Reputation. The past decades have presented us with plenty of examples of corporate leaders who were once revered, but allowed their ambition to drive them to a point where they lost sight of moral and legal boundaries. Winning becomes the only thing that matters, and it has to happen at any cost. Major corporations such as Enron, Tyco, and WorldCom have experienced their downfall due to excessively ambitious leaders who were once admired, but somewhere lost sight of the limits of responsible behavior. Yet these are not the only areas where a fascination with winning has led to damaged trust and reputation. The desire to become a star has penetrated so deeply in the psyche of some people that they overstep the boundaries of honorable behavior, only to continue feeding their ambition.

Nonetheless, ambition remains a phenomenon that speaks to the imagination of many people, especially in a country such as the United States. The fascination with winning can be seen every night on television in a wide variety of shows, such as "America's Next Top Model", and "Dancing with the Stars". What we should realize when considering the great success rate of such programs is the fact that the subject of the show is actually of secondary importance. The biggest thrill is the process of winning and losing: that eternal tension and the identification we build with some of

those on the screen. Ambition is a powerful, yet dangerous vehicle that can lead to major victories, but also to tragedy. The greater one's ambition becomes, the higher one's self-absorption, and this happens at the expense of everything else in life (Marques, 2016).

Acceptance: The Beacon of Sanity

Acceptance is often perceived as a misplaced sentiment, because it directly contradicts the image of strife that has been nestled deeply into the very fabric of modern society. Active, productive, striving people are not considered to "accept" anything: they should fight for what they believe, and thereby control their emotions and sensations. In fact, emotions have for the longest time been considered misplaced in work-related settings. Unfortunately, that is counter-intuitive to human nature, because we are emotional beings, and therefore cannot turn our emotions on and off as if they were a light switch.

Acceptance versus Avoidance

The fact that emotions have been depicted as taboo in professional environments for so long has significantly contributed to the leadership problems we have been dealing with in recent decades, where corporate CEOs have been parking their conscience and emotions at the door in order to make the most self-centered decisions without any concern or consideration for other stakeholders than the stockholders of the company they are representing. It is important to understand that there is a clear difference between accepting and avoiding, especially when it pertains to our emotions. In work settings, but also in private ones, it is irresponsible to keep ignoring our emotions, because they simply will not allow us to get away with doing that forever. Like a volcano, they will erupt one day when we least expect them, and create a much larger disruption than if they had been acknowledged and addressed properly. Accepting our emotions, our setbacks, or our limitations, is not a sign of lethargy or being defeated. In fact, it is exactly the opposite: accepting that we have those emotions will allow us to pay attention to them, analyze them, and come to terms with them in a satisfactory way, thereby preventing future eruptions from happening (Marques, 2016).

Acceptance versus Resistance

Within the context of professional performance, acceptance can be seen as an essential act toward progress, particularly in situations of change and the execution of strategies. Human beings are, by nature, averse to change, even if the status quo is far from desirable. Most people would rather settle for a not-so-pleasant but familiar situation than a great-sounding, but unfamiliar future. If this is already a known issue in private settings, imagine the difficulty to overcome resistance and establish acceptance in professional environments! "When implementing strategies, resistance to change must be overcome; if this does not happen, the change management effort will not be successful. If you can encourage acceptance to change, a positive outcome is more likely" (Johannsdottir et al., 2015).

Acceptance of the need to change, followed by acceptance to change, becomes even harder to obtain if there is insufficient trust between the workforce and the leaders. Change represents an unknown future in which anything can go wrong: people often fear that they will have to learn a lot in order to succeed in the changed situation and that they may not be as savvy in the new circumstances than they were in the old; they may also dread the loss of their comfort zone, represented in a familiar set of tasks, a familiar workstation, or familiar colleagues, all of which can be at stake when change looms.

In cases of accepting changes in the workplace, or getting others to accept these changes, clear communication needs to happen, in order to increase the will to accept. In work settings, employees

will become more open and committed to change if they believe in their leaders, and become more willing to accept the risks that come with the change (Chawla & Kelloway, 2004). Acceptance grows as the changed situation loses its threat.

Conscious Acceptance

As mentioned earlier, acceptance should not be a lethargic, reactive pursuit, but an active choice, in order to make it a rewarding experience. In Buddhist psychology, consciousness is a prominent concept in many regards. It is the underlying factor through which we should undertake all our actions, internally as well as externally. When we accept situations, theories, beliefs, or guidelines, we should apply consciousness, and stay away from the pitfall of mindless adopting, as so often happens. Gautama Siddhartha, the Buddha, emphasized the importance of conscious consideration at every change he had. He even encouraged his followers to refrain from merely accepting anything he taught, but rather to consciously and thoroughly evaluate it before deciding whether to accept or reject the lecture. The philosophy behind the above is to rid ourselves from ignorance, which is so deeply embedded in the common trend of mindless acceptance. Our acceptance, instead, should be of a conscious, well-considered nature, so that it becomes wisdom (Marques, 2012).

Another critical aspect in Buddhist psychology is the understanding that our aims for achievement are beyond our control. The fact that we keep yearning for material and immaterial gratification implies that we fail to accept the gift of life as it is presented to us, but constantly try to modify it. This brings a constant sense of dissatisfaction along, and, therewith, suffering. Our ingrained desire to desire things, people, and feelings, causes us to deviate from mindful acceptance, and leaves us in a state of lingering dissatisfaction (Brach, 2008). Our tendency to continuously strive for improvement keeps us on the move and enables us to make the progress we wish for, but at the same time, it causes stress, internal frictions, and oftentimes also conflicts in personal and professional environments. Here is where the Buddhist tradition offers the option of mindfulness meditation, or Vipassana, which provokes greater equanimity, resulting in better physical and emotional stability, improved quality of life, and overall wellness. Regular engagement in mindfulness meditation (Brach) enables us to understand and accept the natural process of arising and passing, which is the foundational nature of everything. As a result of that, we learn to keep the bigger picture and the sense (or senselessness) of our actions in mind, and become more mindful about our goals and the reasons why we should (or should not) aim to achieve them.

Acceptance as a Management Strategy

A guaranteed recipe for success in professional circles is to accept other people without judgment, and granting them a sense of comfort, so that they can feel at ease and open up. Accepting people as they are increases the chance of being accepted in return. Once it is clear that you accept others in their natural ways, they will appreciate being around you. While you may set behavioral standards, you should always keep a clear distinction between the behavior and the person. *Behaviors* can be improved to meet the requirements of an environment, but *people* should be accepted as they are. This acceptance starts with the self. If you cannot accept yourself, you will have an even harder time accepting others. Yet, if you accept yourself, it will become easier to accept others as well (Fuimano, 2005).

People who have come to terms with the concept of acceptance of the self, as well as others, are no longer in need of controlling their surroundings. The awareness that nothing can really be controlled, other than yourself and your actions, gives way to the understanding that others comply with much more enthusiasm when you mentor and encourage them than when you would try to control them. This same mindset will help you understand that everyone sees the world differently,

and that your sense of reality is not the same as another person's. Different people have different viewpoints, based on the entire baggage of culture, education, upbringing, character, and many more factors. Accepting this notion is a great help in accepting the viewpoints of others, even though they may differ from yours (Fuimano, 2005).

Acceptance of people's differences usually results in greater openness to listen to and accept their perspectives, because you understand that listening to their perspectives can help expand yours (Fuimano, 2005).

Acceptance as Internal Purifier

While acceptance does not come easy to ambitious people, it remains an important part of life. There will always be situations and occurrences that you cannot change, no matter how much you would like to. Those dreadful moments when you have to accept things you cannot change don't feel pleasant. They can conjure up a lot of anger, sadness, and sometimes even despair. However, in hindsight it often becomes clear why we all have to go through such moments of acceptance.

- First and foremost, because we need to be reminded that we are not in control, so we should not walk around with that illusion.
- Secondly, because we sometimes need a wakeup call that reminds us that we need to see everything in proper perspective. We often get tempted to fixate on one achievement, and neglect everything else in order to favor that one focus point. When things go wrong with our focus point, we get upset, possibly even depressed, and we cope with a sense of hopeless loss for quite some time. Yet, gradually, we begin to realize that this obsession, which we felt so passionate about, was just a passing stage in our life, just like so many other things, and we regain our balance and zest for life.
- Thirdly, because we miss the ability to see into the future and therefore run the chance that a wonderful opportunity today may turn out to be a huge mistake tomorrow. It's only in hindsight that we often realize why we had to forego past opportunities. As the future becomes the present, those of us who pay attention begin to understand why we had to accept a setback, and we come to appreciate the way things worked out. As these trends of seeming setbacks recur, our acceptance level may grow based on the insights we obtained from past experiences.

Acceptance as a Satisfaction Strategy

Acceptance is a popular topic in both Western and Eastern psychology. Several studies have been executed with acceptance as one of the central elements, as will be seen in the following sections. In a study conducted among 149 students who were asked to keep a daily journal for 3–14 days, in which they kept track of their failures and how they dealt with them, it turned out that those students who engaged in positive reframing, acceptance, and humor experienced higher levels of overall satisfaction (Stoeber & Janssen, 2011). The study distinguished two general categories of students: those who coped with high levels of self-blame, and those who coped with positive reframing, acceptance, and a humoristic outlook. Even though this last-mentioned group of students was as stressed as their peers when they experienced their setbacks, and even though they were no less focused on attaining perfection compared to the others, they refrained from excessive self-blame and experienced higher levels of satisfaction at the end of the day (Stoeber & Janssen).

It turned out that students who used social support, venting, denial, behavioral disengagement, and self-blame were less satisfied than those who chose to reframe their experiences in a positive way, accepted the situation, and sought the humor in the occurrences. In fact, the more they used these mechanisms, the more satisfied they became!

Acceptance as Therapy

Acceptance is oftentimes linked to mindfulness. This makes good sense, because, in order to get yourself to accept things you would like to change, you have to focus on your emotions, the reasons why you have them, and the sense they make or lack. In recent studies, mindful acceptance has been related to lower perceived stress (Myers et al., 2012). As a pair, acceptance and mindfulness have been used effectively in intervention approaches against behavioral and mental problems. One of these approaches, the “Acceptance and Commitment Therapy” (ACT), has significantly contributed to positive outcomes in substance abuse, high-risk sexual behaviors, exhibitionism, posttraumatic stress disorder, self-harm, and smoking (Zarling et al., 2015). The foundation of its success lies in the fact that ACT aims to increase psychological flexibility by helping its practitioners to be more aware of the present moment, accept troubling emotions more easily, release negative thoughts, obtain a more solid perspective, identify values, and become more committed (Zarling et al., 2015). As was the case with acceptance as a satisfaction strategy (above), the combination of mindfulness and acceptance, as used in ACT, enables the practitioner to become more successful in attaining inner balance and positive behavior as time passes and the skills become a habit (Zarling et al., 2015).

ACT has also successfully been applied in executive coaching. When applied to organizational settings, the word “therapy” is wisely replaced by “training” (Moran, 2010), possibly to make it sound less clinical. Multiple studies have found that Acceptance and Commitment Training is effective in increasing work performance, reducing work stress, increasing innovation, improving acceptance of new training at work, and reducing work errors. Using ACT in leadership actions is not intended to drive leaders to avoid their duties, but rather to accept the emotions they feel while doing so, understand them, and deal with them, rather than avoid or neglect them (Moran, 2010).

Accepting Responsibility over the Self

It may seem that we are always taking responsibility over ourselves, but is that really the case? When observing people around us, there are two clear extremes: those with a high internal locus of control, and those with a high external locus of control. The first group accepts responsibility toward the self all the time, even when such is not called for. The second group blames everything on everyone but the self.

It is easier to take responsibility for ourselves when all is well, but when we make mistakes, this attitude becomes more complicated. Yet it is exactly in problematic situations that we have to accept responsibility toward ourselves, because only then can we learn from our slip-ups and move on with the intent to improve. Simply downplaying the seriousness of our mistake and trying to move on with the internal feeling that we did not really do anything wrong will not benefit us. Doing that is mainly a way of saving face, excusing our actions, and avoiding responsibility. In such cases, we can speak of “pseudo self-forgiveness”, a phenomenon where we actually never really blamed ourselves, and had always accepted ourselves without any real sense of having done something wrong (Wenzel et al., 2012). People who engage in a “quick and dirty” process of pseudo self-forgiveness are usually rather self-absorbed, callous, and narcissistic, with low abilities for shame, guilt, or empathy.

It is only when we actually acknowledge and accept our actions that we can start working on an improved sense of self (Wenzel et al., 2012). That being said, however, it also needs to be admitted that this is not an overnight accomplishment, and that there is always the danger of becoming stuck in self-resentment. Moving on will require overcoming this self-resentment, abandoning the desire to engage in self-punishment, acknowledging the wrongdoing, and raising compassion, generosity, and love for the self, in order to become more motivated to accept the self again (Wenzel et al., 2012).

While both the pseudo self-forgiveness and the real self-forgiveness lead to a better feeling about ourselves, there is no doubt about the difference in depth and genuineness of each. In the end, we

have to face ourselves, so only we know whether our efforts to accept responsibility in difficult times were merely hollow mirages, or genuine steps to inner growth.

Accepting Responsibility over Others

When we embark upon a new venture, whether this happens in a private or professional realm, we don't merely accept a position, but more than anything, we accept a responsibility. In leadership positions, we have seen a serious misconception emerge in past decades, where leaders turned out to be mainly concerned about their shareholders and their bank account. Sometimes this concern was further narrowed down to only the bank account. And as this trend became a culture, it was no longer questioned, and leaders could get away with an extremely narrow focus in their performance. That is, until the problems started piling up, the economy got disrupted, and people lost their investments. The inevitable panic that emerged forced us to reconsider the obligation we accept when we agree to leading others. Leadership is not just a glamorous position in which you run ahead of everyone else and feel like a celebrity. Rather, it is a responsibility that requires prioritizing the progress and wellbeing of others, oftentimes at the expense of your own advancement. Leading well means following well. There will always be rules, priorities, goals, and visions to be accepted, and real leadership is expressed in understanding this. Some of the factors to be accepted, as identified by McConnell (2003), are:

- Accepting responsibility for the actions and the results of those actions for the entire group one leads.
- Accepting that this responsibility should prevail over self-responsibility; accepting the collective goals over personal ones.
- Accepting the duties of a serving as a role model, and all the visibility and availability requirements this brings.
- Accepting the duties of being a teacher and mentor for those who may need some extra guidance.
- Accepting the task of serving as a team facilitator, obstacle remover, and support system to help others become successful.
- Accepting the mindful duty of serving as the foundation of leading.

Where Acceptance can become a Problem

In the previous section of the chapter, acceptance was profiled as a great skill. Some of the known advantages of acceptance are: 1) Peace in difficult times. Acceptance can be instrumental in over-seeing the situation more calmly and working toward a responsible, well-considered solution (Lewis, 2013); 2) Self-love. Accepting ourselves is often a harder chore than we think. It's so easy to become upset with ourselves when things go wrong, but loving ourselves is one of the best manifestations of acceptance (Lewis, 2013); 3) Connecting with others. When we engage in efforts to understand others and embrace them for who and what they are, we are engaging in constructive acceptance (Lewis, 2013); 4) Flow. Accepting the fickle turns of life guarantees better resilience and less stress. The more we accept the tides of life, the easier it becomes to live (Lewis, 2013); and 5) Commitment to our cause. Acceptance can help us to expand our focus from narrow to broad and recognize the bigger picture of our life: our greater calling, purpose, and dharma (Lewis, 2013).

Yet as is the case with any good quality, when applied in excess, acceptance, too, can become more of a problem than a blessing. The art of applying a quality as a strength is to detect the line where it becomes a weakness. This goes for ambition, which, in excess, can convert into ruthlessness and a source of enormous stress; perseverance, which, in excess, can convert to embarrassing and

humiliating persistence; and definitely also for acceptance, which, in excess, can convert to lethargy. Lethargy is described as lack of energy or enthusiasm. Lethargic behavior makes a person seem indifferent, lazy, and apathetic.

When we accept the things that happen to us at an excessive level, we lose our fighting spirit. It is like putting too much water into our wine and losing the taste along the way. Not only does excessive acceptance dull our senses and our ambition, it also reflects negatively on us, especially in professional circles. Lethargic behavior is easily seen as laziness and disinterest at work and will not keep the displayer of such behavior employed for very long. There are many people who stay in situations and environments that fail to grant them the satisfaction they need to perform with passion and devotion. One might wonder why these people stay in those bad situations or places. The reasons are wide ranging. For instance, people may be used to the current situation and may simply abhor change; they may never have questioned the reasons for their current aversion to the situation they are in; they may be fearful of the consequences of leaving the situation in which they currently are; they may feel that they have invested too much in the current situation to leave it behind; they may want to leave, but are insecure of what awaits outside; or they may be at a loss for what they want to do aside from the current situation.

Acceptance as a Hurdle toward Progress. There is such a thing as “blind acceptance”, in which people accept a fact or situation without doubting whether it makes any sense to them in their current circumstances. We see this trend very often in people with strong cultural or religious convictions, and in those with low education levels. In cases where people refrain from doubting whether something should be changed or possibly even completely discontinued and replaced, acceptance serves as a serious impediment toward progress. Similarly, when people accept a downright bad situation in which they are abused or taken advantage of but continue to wait for others to help them out, acceptance is a problem. In the latter case, we speak of an external locus of control. People who feel powerless to do something about their own misery and just accept it until someone else drags them out lack the internal drive to take responsibility for their wellbeing or progress into their own hands. Admittedly, fear is a powerful mechanism to force people into accepting bad situations: some people try to achieve something, but eventually stop doing so when they are punished a few times.

There is a well-known story online about monkeys who have been punished when trying to obtain a banana. The story explains how five monkeys were placed in a room with a ladder and a banana on top of the ladder. Every time one monkey tried to climb up the ladder, the others were sprayed with cold water. Soon, the monkeys made it a point to ensure that no one would get on the ladder to prevent the others from being sprayed. When one of the original monkeys was replaced by a new monkey, the newcomer tried to climb the ladder, unaware of the history, and got attacked by the other monkeys. This may still be understandable, but here comes the kicker: when yet another one of the original monkeys was replaced with a new monkey, he also tried to climb the ladder, and got attacked by all other monkeys, including the one who came in late and was unaware why no one should climb the ladder! In the long run all original monkeys were replaced by new ones, but the process of attacking any newcomer that tried to climb the ladder had now become a ritual, even though none of the monkeys knew why this was the case (Maestriperi, 2012).

We see this type of behavior in human beings all the time: holding on to old rituals and rules without knowing why this is done, but refraining from asking because “it has always been done this way” (Maestriperi, 2012). If one person would try to change the situation, he or she would risk being vilified.

Acceptance as an Avoidance Strategy. In work settings, but also in private life, acceptance usually brings greater peace and less friction. However, there are times when acceptance equals stagnation in progress or failing to look for solutions to a problem. In those times, some kind of confrontation is needed to solve issues. Crisis situations, difficult or non-producing co-workers, competitive challenges, and loss of market share are just some of the issues in work related settings that will only

further escalate with acceptance. Similarly, in a private situation, accepting that a loved one has lost his or her way, or accepting neglect, ignorance, or increased alienation from those we care for, will only lead to further regression of situations.

In our interactions with others, whether personally or professionally, we have to detect the invisible line between acting and accepting. Not everything requires action. There are some situations that have to run their course in order for improvement to emerge. For instance, when dealing with severe weather influences, government-instated regulations, or social unrest, it may be wise to lay low until the tide turns. But when we find our revenues dwindling due to unexpected actions from a competitor, we cannot sit back and accept our fate until the competitor has robbed us from our entire market share and, hence, livelihood. So that's the time when we need to synergize our creative powers and formulate a counter strategy that will safeguard our position, and hopefully even win us some new terrain. Similarly, when we get confronted with situations that will damage the reputation of our organization, such as fraud, hostility, carelessness, chaos, or malfunctioning communication lines within our organization, we have to undertake action in order to resolve the problems and restore trust, order, and performance.

Acceptance as a Pacifier. Sometimes people accept the unacceptable because they want to pacify others. Accepting undeserved blame, insults, and discrimination are some examples of this trend. The reasons for accepting these troublesome downers may be diverse, and the acceptance may be justified, but it remains harmful to the psyche nonetheless.

Balancing Ambition and Acceptance toward Enduring Happiness

Ambition and acceptance: in discussing both qualities in this chapter, it came to light that each of them fulfills an important role in our sense of achievement, and, consequently, our performance. However, we need to develop a balance to maintain each mindset in the most suitable way toward a “happy medium”. Yet, we should first and foremost understand that what is considered “suitable” for one person, may not be so for another. Our balance point will vary, so we will have to engage in some personal mental exploration to tune into our personal equilibrium.

It is an art to find our personal balance between ambition and acceptance, and much of our personal definition of happiness will determine what that balance will be.

Following is an exercise—the Daily Reflection Cycle—that can help you identify your personal balance between ambition and acceptance.

A great exercise that can become a constructive and insightful balancing habit is to engage in reflection at the end of each day. This reflection exercise can be done individually or with a trusted partner. Ask yourself:

- 1 What went right?
 - What contributed to this “right event”?
 - How did you feel?
 - Who benefitted from it?
 - What are you most grateful for regarding this occurrence?
- 2 What could have been better?
 - Why do you feel it could be better?
 - How do you feel?
 - Who was hurt/harmed?
 - What can you learn from this in order to prevent it from happening again?
 - What good thing(s) came out of this? (List as many as possible.)

For Major Windfalls:

- What happened?
- What is the purpose of this happening?
- Why do I think I deserve this?
- Who should I thank?
- Who should I include in the windfall and why?
- What has changed in my life?
- What are some potential downsides to this windfall?
- Down to earth reminder: this too shall pass.

For Major Setbacks:

- What happened?
- What is the purpose of this happening?
- Why might I need this experience?
- Could this have been avoided? If so, how?
- Who should I protect in this situation?
- What has changed in my life?
- What are 5 (or more) “good things” that came from this setback?
- Down to earth reminder: this too shall pass.

Increasing Our Sense of Happiness

Some good actions that can help us increase our sense of happiness are:

- 1 Nurturing a gratitude mindset: write three *new* things that you are grateful for every day.
- 2 Keep a daily journal of positive experiences you had.
- 3 Engage in exercise, and make sure cardio activities are included.
- 4 Meditate and focus on your breathing, even if for a short while daily.
- 5 Perform small conscious acts of kindness every day (Marques, 2016).

Once these acts become part of your daily routine, your happiness level will increase.

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