

Without Ambition,
No Conquests Are Made,
No Lands Discovered,
No Businesses Created

*Ambition Is the Root of
All Achievement*



People have always felt somewhat ambivalent about ambition. We see it as dangerous yet essential. We disapprove of those who abuse it, but we dismiss those who lack it. We see too little of it as a failing, too much of it as a sin. We sense that ambition is combustible, a form of energy that can bring us immortal glory but also destroy us forever, depending on how we use it. Simply put, ambition is what makes us *go*. Ambition is the spirit of success, of striving for something worth achieving.

THIS BOOK IS AIMED at all those who dream of achieving greatness in any field. We offer it as a handbook of lessons derived from the lives of great achievers past and present. The first lesson is that achievers in all fields—art, business, politics, science—and of all ages face similar challenges in accomplishing something great. What changes is the context within which the challenges occur.

The principles of this book come not from conventional psychology (clinical or theoretical) but from life experiences. They are derived from our own long observation of ambitious people, both past and present, in all walks of life.

Our ideas apply equally to those who pursue their particular ambition acting on their own and to those who act as members of large organizations. Indeed, this book is for anyone who sets out to accomplish anything truly excellent, no matter where or how.

We have found that the careers of ambitious people typically follow a predictable path—the *arc of ambition*. Hence the title of this book.

The curve of the arc isn't necessarily the same for every individual. For some, the rise of the curve is slow. The first dreams are just that, dreams. They are personal, secret, not even divulged to family or friends. Then, as the curve rises, these dreams provide a springboard for action.

Samuel Moore Walton comes to mind. His dreams began while he was still a schoolboy, selling milk from the cows on his family's Depression-poor farm. But Walton did not open his first Wal-Mart store until he was forty-four years old.

For others, the curve rises quickly. Ambition thrusts the dreamers into the limelight, sometimes right onto the world stage, at an amazingly early age.

Michael S. Dell, founder of Dell Computer Corporation is a prodigious example. In the early 1980s, while only a college student, Dell began building computers tailored to the specific needs of his customers. When his customer base grew, he quit college. The company he founded in 1984 to build computers to fit demand quickly became successful. It went public in 1988. Michael Dell became a billionaire when he was thirty-one years old.

Most of us dream of greatness at an early age. We envision growing up to emulate our favorite role models, whether they be parents, teachers, or athletes. Schoolbooks introduce us to national heroes, from Abe Lincoln to Rosa Parks and Sally Ride. All this nurtures the seedling of ambition that is planted at birth.

Your goal may be expansive—to become a twenty-something Internet millionaire, to run for the United States Senate, to win an Olympic gold medal, to write a novel. Or it may be more modest—to become mayor of your hometown, to run a local business, or to teach a subject you love. Whatever the size of your goal, it is ineluctably driven by ambition, the unique human energy that primes our efforts and shapes our achievements. Understanding how the arc of ambition works in your own life will almost certainly make those efforts more effective.

Our book maps the arc's three principal segments. The first segment covers the rise of ambition: the initial dream of an individual and the perseverance and courage he or she must exercise in pursuit of that dream.

The second section of the arc covers the apex of ambition. It usually is demonstrated by those who seek to build some orga-

nization larger than themselves. It could be a business, a university, even an army.

The third section confronts the decline of ambition—the time when every achiever must cope with his or her hardest challenges.

In the pages ahead, we explore the mysterious process whereby great men and women emerge, often from obscurity, to trace their own arcs of ambition. Is it their doing, the luck of the draw, or some supernatural talent scout at work? Do achievers make history, or does history make achievers?

Some nineteenth-century thinkers, among them the Scottish essayist and historian Thomas Carlyle and the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, argued that “heroes” shape events. Others, such as Russian novelist and moral philosopher Leo Tolstoy, countered that great men and women are pretty much the products of their times.

The facts, we believe, support both theories, weakening each. Had Madame Curie and her husband not “discovered” radium, for example, might not someone else have accomplished the feat soon thereafter? Without Abraham Lincoln at the helm, would the United States have ceased to exist? If William H. Gates III were not the unique person he is, would Microsoft Corporation have been founded by another? Without the vision and drive of Akio Morita, would Sony Corporation still have become the global powerhouse it is today?

We can surmise that achievers arise from a rich ragout of unpredictable *ifs*. If people have the talent and the training, if they are in the right place at the right time, and if they have the inner drive we call ambition, they may succeed and hold onto their success.

Quite often, great achievers spring from obscurity. And, just as often, their very obscurity galvanizes their ambitions.

John Keats, the major sonneteer of nineteenth-century English Romantic poetry, was the tubercular son of a London stable-keeper. He was completely disconnected from the perks and playing fields of Eton and the political benches of Westminster. Yet, long before the sons of upper-class families were sent out across the world to rule an empire, he toiled at poetry so effectively that today he remains among the two or three masters of melodic verse in the English language.

Howard Schultz, who built Starbucks Corporation from a single store on the Seattle, Washington, waterfront into a worldwide chain with more than 2,400 retail locations, traces the roots of his ambition to the poverty of an apartment in Brooklyn, New York. "From my personal experience," he says today, "the more uninspiring your origins, the more likely you are to use your imagination and invent worlds where everything seems possible. That's certainly true for me."

Relentless hard work in the service of an ardent ambition often prevails. Consider Leonardo da Vinci, the polymathic Renaissance painter, sculptor, engineer, musician, and scientist. We tend to think of Leonardo as a unique marvel placed on earth to teach the rest of us a little humility, and perhaps that was so. "Leonardo," says Roger A. Enrico, chairman and chief executive officer of PepsiCo, Inc., and a student of da Vinci, "mastered the sweet things of life, like the Mona Lisa, and the not-so-sweet, like war machines. Artist, engineer, scientist, mathematician—if he did it, he excelled."

But Leonardo made good not so much by divine guidance as by constant hustle and a prodigious output of ideas supported by incessant labor. For him, living and leveraging were one.

Consider the sales pitch he sent the war-worried Duke of Milan in 1482. Most of the letter offers various ingenious solutions to the duke's urgent problems with military defense and enemy bombardments. But then Leonardo gets around to what he really wants, an art grant, a meal ticket allowing him to paint and tinker on the duke's money. "In time of peace," he finally mentions, as if in passing, "I can perform sculptures in marble, in bronze or in terra cotta. In painting, I am able to do what another may."

What is this drive, this compelling hunger to achieve, this *ambition*? Ambition started out as a pedestrian notion derived from the Latin word *ambitionem*, meaning to walk around soliciting votes. But its reality can be fierce and its results momentous.

Listen to the Roman historian Suetonius on the subject of Julius Caesar's ambition. "At Gades, Caesar saw a statue of Alexander the Great in the Temple of Hercules and was overheard to sigh impatiently: vexed, it seems, that at an age when Alexander had already conquered the whole world, he himself had done nothing epoch-making." In time, Caesar made up for that slow start.

Or hear Napoléon Bonaparte, that avatar of ambition, describe himself under its spell: "I feel myself driven toward an end that I do not know. As soon as I shall have reached it, as soon as I shall become unnecessary, an atom will suffice to shatter me. Till then, not all the forces of mankind can do anything against me." Nor, in fact, could they—for a time.

In modern usage, ambition is both goal and goad—a compulsion to strive for something worth achieving. No action—and certainly no great enterprise—is thinkable without it. Ambition can transform anything. It has tamed continents and launched civilizations, built cathedrals and toppled despots, cured diseases and

put men on the moon. Ambition can change a simple idea into a global business. It can inspire a gifted teacher to redeem wasted minds. It can turn a family of immigrants into a financial dynasty. It can lift a political prodigy from the obscurity of a trailer childhood to election as the president of the United States.

Ambition keeps altering the human condition, not always for the best, yet on the whole, for good rather than ill. In the table of human elements, ambition is the catalyst that ignites daring achievers and converts the ordinary to the extraordinary. In every field, those who make things happen are propelled by some powerful desire to change their worlds and their own destinies in the process.

Ambition drives those intrepid individuals who see what no one else has seen and achieve what no one else thought could be achieved—forever changing the context of their art or science or industry, opening the way for hundreds of other innovations. By flying the Atlantic Ocean for the first time, Charles Lindbergh triggered the rise of global airlines and foreshadowed space exploration. By charting the human subconscious for the first time, Sigmund Freud invented psychoanalysis and undoubtedly changed the role of religion. By organizing an assembly line for the first time, Henry Ford launched worldwide auto-mobility and its profound economic consequences.

We believe these achievers, and others like them, have much to teach us. Their challenges were, in principle, not so different from those that anyone aspiring to greatness faces today. Yet, the quest for greatness has lately encountered something new and acutely important. Both ambition and achievement now rise and fall with unprecedented speed.

This new condition grows out of a sea change in our technological context, a kind of seismic wave that sweeps over the

world every half-century or so and reinvents our lives. Each new context brings forth its own versions of the three archetypal figures of achievement.

First come those we call the *Creators*. They are the true innovators, who pioneer a new technology to the point of making an old field technically obsolete. In the arts, dancers like Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham shook off the constraints of classical ballet and introduced the modern age to dancers everywhere. Cubism in painting showed us another way of looking at the objects around us and led the way to the twentieth century explosion of abstract expressionism. And Ernest Hemingway's terse style broke the florid tone of Victorian writing. In the sciences, pioneers from Albert Einstein to Norbert Wiener to Jonas Salk gave the human species unprecedented control over nature.

Next come the *Capitalizers*, who market the innovative technology so energetically that a whole new infrastructure is required to accommodate its distribution. The nation's electronic subsystem, for example, has been rebuilt at least three times in the past seventy years or so, from telegraph to telephone, from radio to television, from cable to Internet. In the arts and sciences, the followers and imitators of the Creators have capitalized on the freedom to experiment and try out new ideas and approaches. One of the great Capitalizers was Albert H. Barr, who made the most of the modernist ferment in New York City in the early twentieth century to create the Museum of Modern Art. In the same era Lincoln Kirstein helped galvanize and organize the modern dance movement.

Finally come the *Consolidators*, the professional managers in business and the museum curators and the theater producers in the arts. In business, it is the ambitious Consolidators who make new technologies work consistently and profitably in cor-

porate settings. Eventually, however, Consolidators tend to look inward to their own corporate cultures rather than outward to changing customer needs, thereby losing the creative and subversive impulses that had brought forth the new technology in the first place. Thus the opportunity is opened for the cycle of creative destruction to begin anew.

The first technological sea change in the United States, born during and after the Civil War, was the fifty-year explosion of late-nineteenth-century industrial and railroad expansion that tamed the continent and turned the United States into a world power. The biggest winners were eight or nine of the most ambitious opportunists ever to soar straight up from poverty to plutocracy, among them Jay Gould, Jim Fisk, Jay Cooke, Andrew Carnegie, Philip Armour, James Hill, and John D. Rockefeller. In a few short years of cutting corners and dodging convention, they focused on turning the superabundant resources of the United States into personal wealth beyond the wildest dreams of even their own fervent imaginations.

The Scottish immigrant Andrew Carnegie, for example, was a seventeen-year-old telegraph clerk in 1852 when he began formulating the huge aspirations that eventually made him the country's top steel tycoon. His goal, the boy clerk wrote, was "to become independent and then enjoy the luxuries which wealth can (and should) procure." Within two years, Carnegie was turning stock market tips into a fortune, all on borrowed money.

The second technological revolution arose in the early 1900s from the mass-production techniques of Henry Ford, a classic Creator. His Model-T spawned the automobile industry that soon challenged the railroad industry, created a booming oil industry, and enabled Americans to become suburban car commuters after World War II.

Detroit's automakers changed the world's business and cultural contexts, with immense consequences for everything from air quality to the fate of big cities and small towns. And not surprisingly, in a pattern familiar to business historians, those automakers eventually became inward-turned Consolidators, slow to understand their customers' sudden switch to Japan's far more efficient cars during the oil crunch of the 1970s and 1980s.

The third technological turning point, now in full sway, has basically derived from the convergence of information and communications technology. These technologies have together created an entirely new context, the information economy, which the Internet supports in a now instantly connected world. Like the printing press, the steam engine, and the automobile, the computer has transformed the very nature of work, introduced extraordinary efficiencies in advanced countries, and instilled others with a consuming ambition to catch up.

But all this progress has a double edge: While triggering great high-technology breakthroughs and enormous opportunities, it also has vastly increased the pace of business and the intensity of competitive pressure. Growth is at such a break-neck pace that whole industries seem to coalesce one year and obsolesce the next. The average life cycle of the strongest companies has reportedly shrunk to less than fifteen years, half of what it was in the 1950s. The driver is, of course, the avalanche of innovations that keep streaming out of start-up companies that, last year, may have been mere garage shop operations.

Not only business but all other aspects of our society have been profoundly altered. In one generation, medicine has changed radically. Diagnosis now relies on an array of tests.

We have CAT scans, PET scans, ultrasound sonograms, MRIs, and many other sophisticated tools. Artists today use computer imaging in their work. Mixed media in entertainment—be it serious plays, pop performances, or movie special effects—have become almost old hat. Professional athletes train by observing themselves and their rivals on the computer screen, as do golfing hopefuls watching their idols execute the perfect swing. There is little in the realm of human endeavor that has not been touched by continuing advances in technology. Just as cyberspace has pushed the boundaries of the earth, so technology is a tool that can help achievers ascend the arc of ambition.

These new tools not only force us to alter our present but also leave us with a largely unusable past and unknowable future. Often, we seem to be caught between two choices: Hunker down (and fail) or bravely improvise (and hope). As an early employee of Bill Gates's Microsoft admitted later, "We sold promises."

In virtually every change-pressured field—from cyberspace marketing to genetic engineering—those who do plunge ahead typically lack precedents to guide them. As early explorers, they resemble Christopher Columbus sailing blindly into uncharted seas, or the Elizabethan adventurer Sir Martin Frobisher vainly attempting to find a Northwest Passage through the Arctic, or Vasco da Gama struggling around the tip of Africa to find a route to India.

Like the Citigroup, Inc., executives trying to merge former rivals into a global financial supermarket, or the ambitious attempts by Mobil Corporation and Exxon Corporation to create a worldwide energy empire, today's achievers frequently have great visions. But getting from A to B is often as dangerous and

mysterious as sailing off into unknown waters was in the age of exploration.

Ambition has always required creativity, daring, and timing, to name but a few of its components. Today it requires all these and more. For example, you can't be successful with a new Internet company just because you are incredibly imaginative, have the heart of a lion, and boast a new stock issue that thousands of seemingly irrational day traders bid up 300 percent the moment it hits the market. Most of all, you need extraordinary perseverance and skill to wait out the time it may take for a new technology to progress from a market dream to actual profitability. And, while you hang in, time may suddenly pass you by when some even newer technology pops up to render yours obsolete.

In these demanding times, when the forces of creative destruction have never been stronger, success clearly requires an ambition of exceptional intensity. And, yet, corporations are still largely run by cautious executives marching to the measured drumbeats of Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., long the presiding genius of the General Motors Corporation. It was Sloan who, in the 1920s, saved troubled GM from dissolution by introducing the disciplines of strategy, financial controls, and vertical integration.

Sloan was a brilliant man, responsible for much of what we define as good management today. But what he did to save GM, so right for his time and place, has left the wrong legacy for ours. Even now, most companies employing a Sloan-like ethos of management control create more fear than vision—and stifle ambition in the process.

Fortunately, changing times have favored a new breed of business entrepreneur. But how much their fresh spirit can reshape management is an open question. As soon as their own companies grow large and unwieldy, one price of success, they tend to

develop corporate antibodies that can kill the very ambition that launched them. These antibodies include elements of overcontrol, parochialism, orthodoxy, and cynicism. Howard Schultz of Starbucks says that he would not rule out hiring someone “because they came from a bureaucratic company. But I would be more skeptical and more probing to see if that person can escape that culture.”

What happens to society when ambition is blunted, especially in large organizations? One possibility is that, over time, the dwindling number of companies and individuals that retain zesty ambition will become fewer and ever more powerful and eventually control the world—as did the barons of the last industrial revolution. If ambition becomes the dividing line of business between the world’s haves and have-nots, then wealth will become even more concentrated in the hands of a few.

We are not socialists. We believe that extraordinary accomplishments deserve extraordinary rewards. History, however, has shown that if wealth or power becomes too concentrated in a few institutions or a few people, the result is often arrogance, abuse, and eventually failure. Such experiences may explain the ambivalence that many people feel about ambition.

Ambition, we think, needs a better reputation.

No society can afford to belittle it, especially now that technology promises ever-greater opportunity. Moreover, history confirms that ambition is more often good than bad. Good ambition is the lifeblood of human advancement.

But what is it that distinguishes good ambition from bad? What sort of achievements should we admire and strive to emulate?

Perhaps the worthiest ambition is the one that goads us to make the best out of whatever talents or conditions life hands

us. We see no virtue in a gifted person who squanders his or her gifts. We rightly admire even a modestly talented person who strives to surpass all expectations.

Why do sports fascinate us? Is it because we love competition, skill, economy of motion? All these, yes, but the biggest reason may be the ceaseless drama of athletes seeking to be the best they can be and then some. As Sam Snead, the superlative golfer, once said, "Forget your opponents and play against par." When we watch great athletes in spellbinding action—Wayne Gretzky, Steffi Graf, Tiger Woods—we can't help pondering what it takes to reach such peaks of performance. What it takes, of course, is incredibly hard work, persistence, and sacrifice. In the brilliant results we find metaphors that we dream of applying to ourselves, and sometimes do.

At the end of the day, then, most of us still believe in the quaint notion that winning isn't everything. We value an athlete's skill and spirit infinitely more than his or her salary. We don't think much of those who mainly seek lucrative endorsements. We appreciate performance, not hubris.

We expect ambition to pay off in something beneficial, whether it is a good new law or a good new product. We respect ambition that adds value to a business, to a community, to knowledge, to life itself.

Making money offers ambitious people a clear objective, but as the New Testament puts it, "What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" Good ambition demands that wealth be created in a way that benefits and inspires others. For the new (and often sudden) rich of our day, there are compelling exemplars from the past—John D. Rockefeller, who established a foundation for social research; Andrew Carnegie, who endowed 2,800 public libraries; Leland Stan-

ford, who funded Stanford University; plus countless lesser-known philanthropists who discovered that giving may provide the most lasting gratification.

The conundrum is that money begets power. And power, depending on its use, can be a force for good. But those who have it must also be wary of its corrupting influence. Humankind seems to be permanently burdened with a long line of power abusers—megalomaniacs ranging from Ivan the Terrible to Saddam Hussein to Slobodan Milosevic to any retrograde executive who still thinks fear is a management method. Authoritarians who use power mainly to subjugate others represent the darkest, most frightening side of ambition.

To be sure, ambition that focuses only on personal gain does little for society and at best profits only a small handful of people. The 1999 replay of the 1849 Gold Rush—the Internet investing mania—is yet another case of dreams aimed at instant gratification. We fear that dreamers keep starting companies for no better reason than to sell them for incomprehensible sums as fast as possible. According to James Daly, editor-in-chief of the new Internet magazine *Business 2.0*: “No longer are entrepreneurs interested in becoming the next America Online or Yahoo or Microsoft. Instead, they want to be purchased by AOL, or Yahoo, or Microsoft. Usually within two years. For about \$100 million. . . . I can’t help thinking we are losing something vital, as entrepreneurs morph from dreamers into sellouts.”

We have yet to see whether the sellouts are pioneers adding value to a digital economy or prisoners of their own delusions. If the past is any guide—and these days it may not be—short-term thinking isn’t always the road to getting richest the quickest. The companies that we most admire in this digital economy are those that have stood the test of time, like Intel, Microsoft, and Dell.

In this book, we offer a new vision of the creative process that transforms dreams into reality: the arc of ambition. And we argue that ambition—key to the human condition—can and must be far more widely disseminated and encouraged. Ambition, however, cannot simply be taught. Nor is it a birthright. But the art of realizing one's ambitions can be learned—learned from the experiences recounted as we move through the arc of ambition described in this book.

Everyone travels through this arc. Some rise higher. Others fall faster. At each stage along the arc, one risks underachieving or overextending. The trick is to strike the balance that enables an individual to achieve his or her own highest aspirations and realize his or her fullest potential. This book is, then, for all of us, because we all have some ambition.

To write it, we have read about, examined, and discussed many facets of ambition. Out of this search has grown an ambition of our own: We hope to show the ways in which you can learn from the experiences, the trials, the mistakes, and the lessons of others, both past and present. We seek to sharpen your sensibilities and awareness of your own actions so that you can examine them honestly and apply the lessons you have learned to your journey along the arc of ambition. We believe that by gathering your strengths and knowing your potential, you will be able to determine your own destiny.

In the pages that follow, we trace the arc of ambition, from rise to fall, as a series of stages:

- *See what others don't.* Fast or slow, the arc begins with a fresh insight, a discovery. It is some perception unseen by others and perhaps not even imagined. No doubt millions of such original thoughts perish year after year.

What saves the few that propel human progress is the spell of ambition—the urging of a dream transformed by the mind’s eye into a belief that something is possible, and from there into a conviction that hard work must and will make it actually happen. Ambition, we note in Chapter 2, is disciplined dreaming, the faith that fierce effort will inevitably turn shadow into substance. Among our cases in point: Dhirubhai H. Ambani, Michael Dell, Judy George, John P. Mackey, Patrick J. McGovern, and the Wright brothers.

- *Follow a steadfast path.* In the mind of an ambitious person, a dream becomes reality infinitely faster than the time it takes to read this sentence. In real life, success more often derives from a series of setbacks confronted and overcome. At the outset, the conditions necessary for success are never quite right. Dreamers invariably encounter missteps, failures, unforeseeable bad luck. A few such obstacles are enough to stop all but those intrepid souls who can’t be discouraged. “All I have is stubbornness,” the physicist Albert Einstein once confessed, probably to unbelieving ears. To progress along the arc of ambition, we argue in Chapter 3, requires perseverance and optimism, unquenchable hope that the moment of opportunity will come. Our cases in point include George Lucas, Nelson Mandela, Thabang Motsohi, and Samuel Moore Walton.
- *Seize the moment.* Dreamers become potential achievers, we explain in Chapter 4, when they surmount the next step along the arc of ambition—that incandescent moment when opportunity suddenly looms like Everest out of a fog, and the dreamer responds with courage and

chutzpah. Hesitating only long enough to make sure that he or she is not hallucinating, the aspiring achiever feels massively imbued with an unflinching impulse—go for it. Among our cases in point: Thomas Jefferson, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ray Kroc, Robert Johnson, William Poduska, Arthur Wellesley, and Margaret C. Whitman.

- *Temper ambition.* The next stage, reaching the apex, entails gaining momentum without losing balance—akin to letting enough wind into your sails to race ahead full speed without tipping over. The key requirement, we argue in Chapter 5, is setting ambitious goals and ensuring disciplined execution. If you execute well but stretch too little, you can wind up with the greatest little coffee shop in Seattle, but not Starbucks. If you stretch far but execute badly, things come apart. Our cases in point include Lawrence J. Ellison, William Jefferson Clinton, and Alfred J. Dunlap—with some advice from Gary C. Wendt.
- *Inspire with a greater purpose.* To continue soaring along the rise of the arc, we need to transform our personal ambition into a broader purpose so that others can join in and contribute to the effort. In Chapter 6, we show that this may not be as difficult as it seems. Some ambitious people see the world as a zero-sum game; they just don't get the idea that victories are more assured when their benefits are shared. Among our cases in point: Cesar Chavez, Mohandas K. Gandhi, Giuseppe Garibaldi, and Robert B. Shapiro.
- *Never violate values.* There will come a point where to move ahead one will be tempted to cut corners, to com-

promise to satisfy one's ambition. Beware of this temptation, we say in Chapter 7, because it will only hasten the decline of your arc of ambition. Surely it does not pay to be dishonest, unethical, or abusive, for example, nor can any organization long sustain repeated violations of its core values. Compromise can work only in unique instances—and for a short period of time. Recognizing true north is the only way to keep your arc pointing upward. Our cases in point include Arjuna, Andrew S. Grove, John R. Lewis, Azim Premji, and Diego Rivera.

- *Keep control by giving it up.* As an achiever who leads an organization, you need people doing their best to achieve the goals you set for them. How do you get their best? Not by asserting your control over them through force or threats, we contend in Chapter 8. The reality is that the only way to keep control is by sharing it with others. Isolated achievers are dangerous to themselves and their organizations. Fear chills minds and kills companies. Nor do you want to be flattered by courtiers playing on your ego. The smartest achievers know that they can only benefit when their colleagues do great work. They have the confidence not to feel threatened when other people flourish. Among our cases in point: William Gross, George Hastapolous, and Abraham Lincoln.
- *Change or die.* The conditions that enabled the rise of the arc don't last forever, we argue in Chapter 9. Things change: The external environment becomes less favorable, you become more complacent, others emulate you and whittle away your unique claim to fame. Unexpected rivals—just as ambitious as you once were—find

ways to change the rules and creatively destroy things you built to last. To stay on the arc, one must change or die. Our cases in point include Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., Peter the Great, Colin Powell, James Rogers, Margaret Thatcher, John F. Welch, Jr., and Deng Xiaoping.

- *Leave gracefully.* Alas, we are mortal. We get old and we die. The power of having achieved greatly, of leaving an immortal legacy, can sometimes make it difficult for ambitious men and women to accept this truest of human truths. They keep searching for the fountain of youth, and not finding it think that by just acting young they can be young. They hang on to the view that the organization's life cannot go on without them. The last passage, we say in Chapter 10, requires us to recognize that ambition can allow us to achieve immortality in history, but not in our own lives. The only good way to confront this fact is to embrace it: Take charge of the truth, and live it out with all the grace, style, and humor that befit a great achiever's great ambitions. Our cases in point include Gilbert Amelio, Sewell Avery, Andrew Carnegie, Roberto Goizueta, Robert Haft, Steven P. Jobs, Dean F. LeBaron, Peter Lynch, John Sculley, and Michael Spindler.

In this book, we pose—and answer—a fundamental question: What is the quintessential human trait? Is it the ability to love, to conceptualize, to imagine? We know that some of these traits are shared with other species. But, in our view, one trait above all others is uniquely human. That trait is *ambition*, the urge to achieve or create, a driving need to improve the known world and perhaps replace it with something better. This is the chal-

lenge that great achievers have met in the past and, we believe, will meet in the future. The human story is fundamentally about people overcoming obstacles and rising triumphantly on the arc of ambition. The story has a cast of millions, in which we all have a part.