

Careers

I Am My Biggest Project

New Horizons For Executives

Chapter 1 | What's Stopping Me?

By
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Amrop

Leaders For What's Next

Introduction



Every working day, I spend hours interviewing professionals. People who are very different, but have something in common: the desire to achieve their goals and realize their dreams. During our meetings, we systematically examine the executive's academic and professional path and in particular the consequences of his or her acts and decisions.

During my career I have had the privilege of interviewing over 40,000 executives. People who have either reached the top, are consolidating their path, or looking for a change of direction. Together we have examined what works for them, and what doesn't. Some decisions seem right at the outset, and become profoundly wrong, as they are based in imitating or pursuing trends without regard for the individual's personality. Others are just wrong *per se*, disconnected from the person's specific environment and circumstances. Over time, I have built a picture of what drives people towards their dreams and goals, and what pulls them away.

So when the publisher Sofia Monteiro approached me with the idea of writing a book about personal fulfillment based on professional life, I had mixed feelings. I wanted to bring something new to the table. I weighed the pros and cons, and decided that I was ready to share what I had learnt. 'I Am My Biggest Project' is the result. Adapted from selected chapters of the book, this Amrop series speaks to executives who are seeking to disrupt themselves in the most positive sense, to prepare the next chapters of their career.

The Founding Partner of Amrop Portugal, Maria da Glória Ribeiro supports organizations in executive hiring, evaluation and development. She has a strong track record in strategic consulting and organizational behavior.

She is the author of 'I Am My Biggest Project', on which this article series is based.

In 2013 she co-authored a study, 'Leadership For Sustainability', The Voice of Portuguese Leaders.

Maria da Glória was named one of the world's Top 200 Executive Recruitment Consultants according to Nancy Garrison-Jenn, author of "The Global 200 Executive Recruiters".

She has an MA in Psychology with a specialization in Business Organizational Development.

The challenge is to reject pre-determination in any form. To revitalize, find the will and strength to fight for What's Next in the name of greater fulfillment. My task is to excite and motivate you to courageously and purposefully address your biggest asset – yourself. For your benefit and that of your personal and professional entourage.

Whilst my own life is not the focus here, it's maybe worth sharing some keys. Despite being born in a privileged environment, I suffered a life-threatening illness, the loss of social references and my support network. I could have felt hopelessly sad and lost, and spent my life in survival mode, clinging to revolt, incomprehension and aimlessness

But I didn't. I decided to take chances, work hard, and strive to be a better version of myself. For myself and by inference, for my personal and professional entourage.

This is the mindset that I would like to share with you.

Maria Da Glória



By Daniel Traça, Professor of Economics and Dean
Nova School of Business and Economics

Foreword

Since the end of the last century, the globalization of trade, capital, technology, communication and capitalism has created a new and schizophrenic world. On the one hand, we have access to more, and better, products and services. We can explore every corner of the world and pursue dreams as yet undreamed. On the other hand, innovation and competition have generated kaleidoscopic systems, extremely volatile and uncertain. For each of us, and for future generations, this offers a world with as many opportunities as risks.

Today we can have international careers that take us from Shanghai to Dubai via New York, spectacular salaries, intense experiences that can change the lives of millions ... or be constrained to unemployment and low wages on the outskirts of big cities, or have careers that bore us. More - the same person can move from one of these states to another - and recover, within a few years.

A critical challenge is the reflection and adjustment that, as individuals and as professionals, we need to survive and thrive in globalization. In an environment of low volatility, with little innovation and limited opposition, where even uncompetitive companies survived for decades, managing our careers simply meant acquiring the relevant competencies for the organization and realizing how to navigate its internal political dynamics. Previous generations organized their lives in this paradigm - the boss's friendship or union protection were the avenues to success.

In contrast, in the kaleidoscopic world of the 21st century, we have to manage a career that will involve several companies, cities, countries, functions, stages of success and failure.

Minimizing mistakes - and I say minimizing, because avoiding them completely is an illusion- involves reflecting in a structured way on our career and framing our decisions and our behavior according to the vision we trace, adjusting it to the reality of

situations we face. We have to listen, reflect, plan, work and believe - always! The risk of not doing so is to be left on the sidewalk of the avenue of success.

When we don't know our direction, the result is not necessarily the best. We become trapped in a career that no longer motivates us, and which we are afraid to escape from, because we don't know where to go.

This series contains simple and practical advice that can help the reader to develop on the one hand the attitude and resilience needed to overcome the barriers that arise and, on the other, to take the right decisions when facing multiple forks in the road. The reader will find in it some recipes to enjoy a Marathon career.

We must pave the way. What am I looking for, going forward? What opportunities exist for me in today's world? What skills? What courses? How to recognize and overcome the difficulties and obstacles that I will encounter?

Even if you don't get all the answers here, the important thing is to think about the issues - and move forward.

Daniel Traça

What's Stopping Me?

If I am my biggest project, and other people are affected by its outcomes, I'd do well to know myself. But forging this relationship is a lifelong exercise. It takes sincerity, authenticity and self-regulation. I have spent two decades interviewing and learning from business leaders. During these interactions I began to notice some recurrent levers that played a core role in success and failure, strengths and pitfalls. These boil down to three major factors: Determinism, Ambition, and Resistance to Change.

Every relationship has a starting point and in this instance it's about taking a look in the mirror – but through the eyes of other people. The mirror is a simple and effective tool for getting to know ourselves more accurately and truthfully. If we can recognize and acknowledge the effect we have on others, correctly identify and decode their feedback based on their image of our behaviors and attitudes, we can better understand ourselves as social beings.

Mirror, mirror, on the wall. What are you telling me?

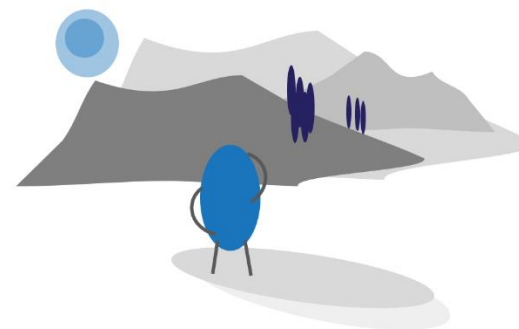
- What stands out the most in my reflection?
- Is this how I really want to be?
- What do I like about myself?
- What do I want to change about myself?
- Why? What effect does this have on my relationships and results?
- What has prevented me from working on this change in the past?

Our evaluation process has to be unique, individualized, appropriate for us. There is no standardized list of strengths and weaknesses, 'sins' and 'virtues'. Our introspective exercise requires maturity, lucidity - and time.

Leadership Headlines

This said, here are 7 of the topline leadership characteristics that are most sought-after by the hiring organizations with whom I work. This is not an exclusive list, nor is it a prescription - each headline gives considerable room for maneuver in terms of style and approach.

- 1 Strategic vision and planning
- 2 Coaching capacity: supporting group improvement
- 3 Entrepreneurship and focus on results
- 4 Priority management
- 5 The ability to interact with and work as a team
- 6 Flexibility, agility and mobility
- 7 Commitment and effort towards continuous improvement.



Let's now look at the three factors.

1 Determinism

The stand-out executives I meet are often in some way atypical, and connect well on a human level. People who can color their existence with something disruptive and innovative linger in my memory, like a work of art that touches and awakens me.

I remember one famous executive director who, having developed successfully in the business world, had a vocation for art that had been revealed in his early childhood. Despite this obvious talent, his family put him under pressure to study economics and build a career in management. Still, he painted on, keeping his connection to art alive as a hobby, and even exhibiting his work. This parallel, complementary activity has significantly contributed to his self-fulfillment.

Over time, I've become used to listening very carefully to people's decision-making processes, seeking to understand the origins of their choices and what influences those choices, to unpack the basis of their motivations, yearnings and ambitions. It has been an interesting learning process - human psychology in its socio-professional context!

Again and again I hear the same 'fatalistic' phrases, in completely different personal circumstances. This is all about *determinism*, absolutes that people use as a shield, a mechanism whereby they see certain factors in their lives as pre-formatting their future and justifying their approach to it. It's as if we were dealing with self-imposed mandates, dictated by an imagined societal rule book.

Here's how: "Now that I'm 42, it's time for ..." (a change of company or some other shift). On the same day I may hear exactly the same discourse from another person. The only difference lies in the magic number '42'. It may be '28', '36' or '52'. (It may be some other age, odd or prime numbers being less probable, since they are less subject to romanticism or predetermination).

I'm reminded of Manuel de Oliveira, the Portuguese film director and screenwriter. Born in 1908, his career spanned the silent and digital ages and even after the age of 100 he averaged one film a year.

What I want to share here is that deterministic norms are excuses and nothing more - reasons we use towards ourselves and others to confirm or justify decisions which are often unlikely to help us to grow as people. They will not bring us greater happiness, and they will not lead us to fulfillment.

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Marathon Runners

Still busy after all these years...

Sir David Attenborough (b. 1926, United Kingdom), naturalist

Warren Buffet (b. 1930, USA), business magnate, investor, philanthropist

Ridley Scott, (b. 1937, UK), film director and producer

Daniel Barenboim, (b. 1942, Argentina), pianist and conductor

Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw (b. 1953, India), biochemical entrepreneur

Angela Merkel, (b. 1954, Germany), Chancellor of Germany since 2005

Christine Lagarde (b. 1956, France), lawyer, politician, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund since 2011.

Interestingly, I have never received justifications for behaviors or aspirations based on race or social stratification. And whilst I have heard references to gender, it is increasingly rare for leadership candidates to associate being hired (or not) with being male or female.

Still, the list of excuses for the professional doldrums seems quasi-infinite: the birth of children; the influence of parents (even grandparents); the malaise of a partner, or some other 'fatal' aspect of birth or development. And yes, occasionally, gender.

Yet the most frequent excuse for a decision, a behavior, or inertia, remains age.

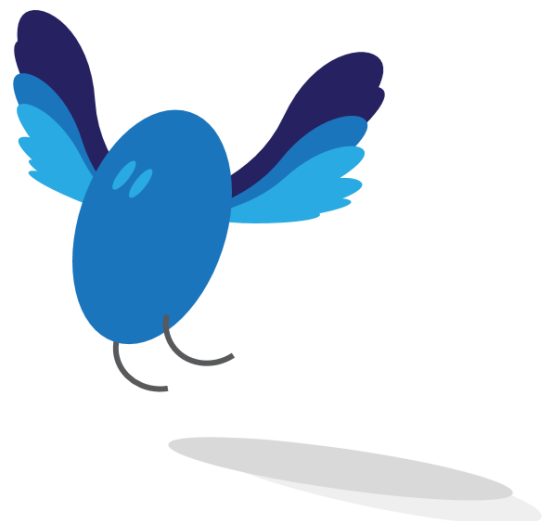
Conformity to our internal rule book is related to determinism. We often hear statements such as: "I've always been this way." This seems to imply: "so there's nothing to be done." This is another fatalistic attitude. It destroys any dynamics of improvement, chaining us to a horoscope of our own making.

It has been said that everything influences us. I am not going to go into academic concepts about the construction of the Self. What I do want to bring to this reflection is the following: *whatever circumstances might have shaped us, everything about ourselves can be developed to a greater or lesser extent.*

We cannot be satisfied to accept any kind of 'fatal mechanism' that conditions our being. And even worse than submitting to the dictates of any past situation or event is to refuse to develop and grow.

Whatever the conjunction of the stars when we were born, the numerical sequence on our date of birth, the composition of our DNA or our position on a so-called social stratum, nothing should bind us to a condition set in stone. We can always choose what we want to improve about ourselves. We can strive to master our process of evolution.

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Breaking Free

- 1 Nothing should hold us back. We own ourselves.
- 2 Our Self is our property and ours alone. It can and should be developed, optimized, enhanced, even beautified - as determined by our own will.
- 3 Once we get to know ourselves, through self-analysis and feedback, a conscious process of change must be initiated, guided by our own will and goals.
- 4 Regarding feedback, we should always be able to hear criticism and praise. Criticism must be decoded, interpreted with wisdom. If what we project towards others does not match our true intentions and we are misinterpreted, we must re-format, synchronize and communicate, in the language or on the frequency of our receivers. Compliments are easier to take, but these also carry risks. A compliment is a positive reinforcement of our self-esteem, but we must beware the pitfall of stardom, the assumption that we have reached our goal and have nothing more to care for and improve.
- 5 If we don't take precautions, the higher we climb, the further we can fall. In principle, everything should be possible for us to attain, provided we respect our own capacities and leverage our circumstances.

Taming the Fox

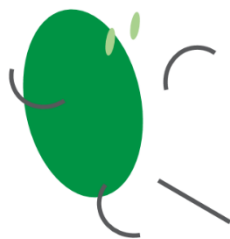
In 'The Little Prince' by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the fox gives us the following idea:

"To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world...."

In conclusion: please don't cancel your future, or create imaginary difficulties!



2 Ambition



Ambition is often associated with leadership, seen as a pre-condition for success and resilience. Ambition is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as 'the strong wish to achieve something,' or more specifically, 'to be successful, powerful, rich, etc.'

Ambition is fluid. It changes as our context changes. Ambition is positive when it motivates us to overcome our limitations and drives us to achieve healthy goals and objectives. Ambition helps us to find the energy and courage to face challenges. Ambition, in one sense, is about competing with ourselves, and acts as a stimulus for change. It is a permanent quest of being more, of reaching further.

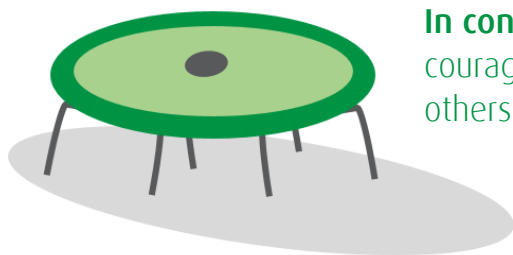
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But ambition can become pernicious. Sooner or later, if unchecked, ambition will lead us to the cliff edge. When ambition obscures our reason and in particular leads us to breach ethical limits, we must expect to be called out and penalized. After all, we live in a society that has installed rules and mechanisms for controlling questionable ethical behavior. And the behavior of today's leaders is under scrutiny 24/7. This is the ethical limit - a framework of rules that allows us to live in a balanced environment of consideration and respect for social rules (which socialization normally instills in us).

However, ambition is not only subject to ethical limits. Another limit lies in the respect for, and the acceptance of, other people.

Consider the new entrant to an organization who systematically tries to outdo and outplay those around him or her, without consideration, group sense or altruism. He or she will find this increasingly difficult, because we live in a transparent web of interdependencies that always connects us as a group. People whose ambition prevents them from seeking collective success, who find it difficult to positively collaborate with others, can rarely achieve their goals.

This does not mean that transcending ethical and social boundaries is restricted to group work. We have all looked on in amazement as a professional cyclist, runner or rider has pushed his or her opponents out of the way, or seen reports of drug abuse at the highest levels of professional sport in the quest for fraudulent advantage. So we need to be aware of the pitfalls of ambition, in ourselves, and in others, whilst trusting others - a healthy sign of self-confidence and self-regulation.



In conclusion: Positive ambition gives us soul strength, courage, rhythm and determination. All without hurting others or disrespecting commitments.



3 Resistance to change (and fear of error)

At the other end of the scale to ambition, we find resistance to change. When we think about the difficulty presented by a new undertaking, a change in attitude or habits, or the need to compromise, it seems that some force drags us into a state of inertia. After an initial phase of naïve enthusiasm, we slow down, waiting for the right time to commit to a decision.

And another defense mechanism arises: denial. We come up with more or less conscious ways of getting rid of the difficulty. We create justifications for our inertia, for postponing action *ad infinitum*. We resist change, either permanently or temporarily. Until the opportunity is lost.

Many of us fear the unknown. As a rule, we human beings prefer to stay in our comfort zone. We do not like to take risks, to accept the probability that we have to learn, expose ourselves to others and strip ourselves of our familiar, pre-formatted image.

When change presents itself, it is as if we are put to the test again without our 'emblem', the protective shell we have built for ourselves and which we have grown used to. For many of us this shell is made up of a litany of behaviors and attitudes that function as a support and shield to face the day-to-day. To develop, we need to be aware of what will need to be unstructured and put up for review. We need courage to restructure – to build new aspects of our personality.

"Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear - not absence of fear" - Mark Twain

Oftentimes our fear is about making mistakes. Facing a potential misstep feels like walking a tightrope. We feel insecure, helpless, lacking in support, painfully exposed. At risk of showing ignorance or an inability to solve the situation we created. We are left defenseless, lacking the courage or energy to face the problems raised by this unfamiliar enterprise.

In my leadership consulting activities, whenever I encounter an extreme case of resistance to change (from clients, candidates, or other interlocutors), I try to intervene. Whilst coaching is not my core area of expertise, I do sometimes try to help the person to become aware of the negative outcome of not being able to change their behavior (and on the other hand, what the plus side could be). I know of cases where, with the help of a coach, people have developed and achieved great career success.

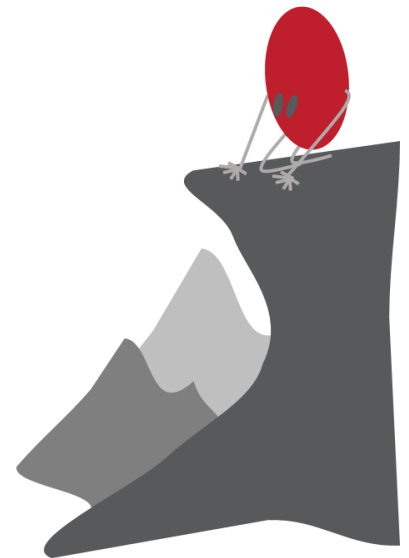
I also know of cases in which the problem persists. I recall an extreme and complicated example of resistance to change. Despite access to the very best support from a behavioral change consultant and excellent technical preparation, this executive's leadership attitudes did not improve. Persistent attitudes of power/distance, a lack of ability to liaise with others, trapped him in his established paradigm.

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If fearing change is part of being human, many exercises can help us combat that fear, and strengthen our ability to face the unknown. For one person, it may be about practicing more or less radical sports, extending her comfort zone and slowly reinforcing her self-esteem. Another might benefit from extended social exposure – joining a new group without his usual friends. For another, the answer could lie in learning how to speak in public - without PowerPoint or notes. I could give more examples, but they would be hypotheses. Only we can really determine what would be the most effective way – for us personally - of breaking down our internal barriers.

The odds of successfully changing our behavior depend on our individual personalities and social repertoire. In general, however, these activities presuppose a gradual 'weaning' off the panic of the unknown. From my own experience and observations, exposure to a gradual rise in rhythm and intensity, facing and overcoming fears through everyday experiences takes us steadily out of our comfort zone, without creating traumatic experiences that would lead us to immediate withdrawal.



Mapping your departure from the comfort zone

- 1 Don't force yourself to master an entire system from day one
- 2 Do expect some failures, maybe even rejections, or a sense of 'de-structuring'
- 3 Overcome your resistance step-by-step. After all, we are exposed to difficulties in our daily lives. These small barriers and difficult steps are great training material for major hurdles
- 4 Facing the new means revealing our ignorance *specifically in this area*, admitting our insecurity and need for help. Preparing for the temporary discomfort of exposure (and perhaps even some ridicule)
- 5 Resist the doldrums, the inertia and the resurgence of the idea that you cannot, or need not develop.

Slow and steady

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In Conclusion: Overcoming our fear of change and error is possible - given three conditions. One, go step by step. Two, admit your vulnerability in this *specific* area by seeking support. And three, remember that the discomfort will only be temporary and well worth the investment. Then you'll find the courage you need!



Bibliography

This article series is adapted from the original book, 'Eu Sou o Meu Maior Projecto', (Maria da Glória Ribeiro, Manuscrito Editora, 2016)

See also: 'Liderança para a Sustentabilidade - A Voz de Quem Lidera em Portugal', Maria da Glória Ribeiro, with Professors Miguel Pina e Cunha, Nova School of Business and Economics, and Arménio Rego, Universidade de Aveiro, (Actual Editora, 2013).

About Amrop

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