



by Brennan Randel

What is it about open displays of ambition that can cause an eye-roll so deep it results in temporary blindness?

Imagine a room full of combat arms second lieutenants on the first day of their basic officer leadership course. To begin the day, their instructor asks them to introduce themselves. “And don’t forget to include your goals for the Army,” the instructor says.

The first few students introduce themselves and include mundane and predictable goals.

“Pass Ranger school.”

“Become a Green Beret.”

“Deploy to combat.”

And then John introduces himself and announces his goal to the class of lieutenants. “I want to be a general officer.”

Eye-roll.

While there isn't polling on how many officers would find John insufferable, I imagine I'm not alone.

It's possible this phenomenon—cringing at individuals expressing their desire to reach the pinnacle of their profession—only applies to public service. I can't speak to its prevalence in the civilian sector, but it wouldn't surprise me if ambition is embraced rather than shunned in a world dominated by profits and losses.

However, I can also imagine the label that might be applied to a brand new investment banker who announces on Day One her intention to become the CEO of the firm one day.

In addition to the military, we see an aversion to ambitious public servants in politics. How many aspiring political candidates have been maligned by the public and the punditry class for being too eager to assume the office they seek? "Hillary Clinton can't be trusted because she'll do anything to win," [read the opening](#) of a piece in *The Atlantic* about the former presidential candidate (the ways in which ambition is weaponized against women is another topic altogether).

The aversion makes sense, in some ways. Public service, after all, is meant to serve the public, not the individual.

So what's the root cause of our collective distaste for public servants expressing their desire to excel in their career? I believe it comes down to the perception that if someone aspires to make it to the top, then they must be willing to do so at any cost. And someone willing to get ahead at any cost is not a team player.

Oddly enough, we typically want others to *have* ambition but not to *be* ambitious. [ResumeLab conducted a survey](#) of 947 working Americans to see if there was a "purely competitive approach to ambition."

Their survey showed that while 80% of respondents believed it was a good thing to be ambitious, 46% of people had previously felt hostility towards a colleague who displayed ambitious behavior.

So there are clearly downsides to expressing ambition. But, even if ambition isn't expressed, it's internalized. It's a silly notion that someone just lucks into becoming a general officer.

I'm not suggesting that general officers start their career with that goal in mind, but at some point, they considered their future and saw stars. And if they liked that version of the future, they would have had to make career decisions to remain in consideration for the hyper-competitive selection process.

Despite its bad rap, is ambition by public servants bad? When an officer pins her first star, does that mean she wasn't a team player? Does it mean she put her individual goals ahead of those of the organization?

Of course not!

When it comes to ambition, most of us have it, yet we are expected to suppress it lest we embarrass ourselves by letting the world know we want to reach the highest rungs of our profession. Imagine a general officer saying, "I just worked hard in every job I had and went wherever the Army sent me. I trusted that it would work out the way it was supposed to, one way or the other." *Oh, come on!*

We shouldn't have to pretend that we aren't thinking twenty years in the future. It's entirely natural.

It should be admirable for someone to aspire to become a flag officer, senator, or president. They are positions of great trust and responsibility, and to earn the highest rank in the military or win an election often requires decades-long discipline and preparation.

But we still scorn those who express their ambition. Is there a way to overcome this dynamic?

We could start by destigmatizing ambitious behavior. There is no easy way to do this—but organizational leaders could start by fostering climates of competitive cooperation. It should be made clear that while individual performance will be rewarded, promotions will only be meted out to those who best supported their peers and direct reports to accomplish organizational goals.

Within ourselves, we could find a way to express ambitious goals while still signalling our desire to help others in their professional journey. "While I do want to be the CEO, I think the best way to accomplish that goal is to provide value to everyone around me, not just for my boss," could go a long way in a conversation about ambition.

And finally, if someone raises their hand and wants to go the distance professionally, let's save the chuckles. Instead, we should lift them up and offer our support.

As for my career-long ambitions? I wouldn't dare share them publicly. We're not there, yet.

Brennan Randel is an active-duty aviation officer and Leadership Fellow for the [Army's Center for Junior Officers](#). He is currently pursuing a master's in legislative affairs at George Washington University, and you can follow him on Twitter [@BrennanRandel](#).

The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the Department of the Army or Department of Defense.

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)