



Career Path: Do You Have a “More” Mindset?

Skills and Professional Development



We live in times of abundance and surplus, when standards of living are higher for more people than they have ever been. How puzzling then that so many people are unhappy with their lot. I think you can lay the blame at the feet of our ambitions.

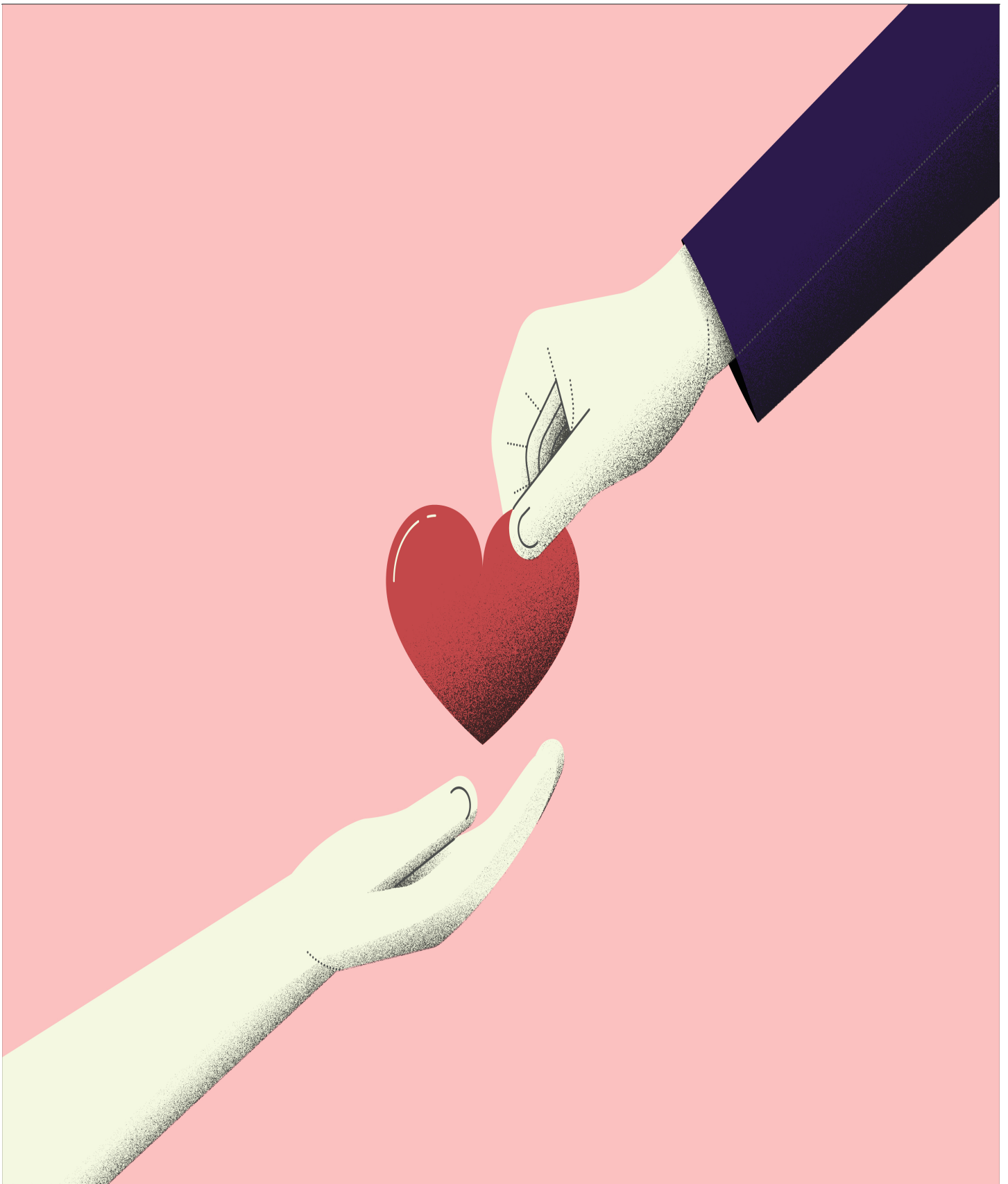
Although striving for material progress served humanity well for centuries by raising us out of widespread poverty into wealth, today it may be causing more harm than good. Let's explore why.

Why are we so ambitious?

We are ambitious because humans at heart are driven by relative status. We live in hierarchies, which are a fundamental facet of every society. For a long time, accumulating material wealth was a way to show you were successful. And the more wealth, the more successful, apparently without any rational upper limit.

Thanks to both normal distributions of ability and the [pareto principle](#), a small percentage of people will be disproportionately successful in whatever dimension you measure, including earnings and wealth. In the last few generations, and largely because most people no longer lack for basic material goods, we've seen some interesting tweaks to the game of jockeying for status.

Today a person can demonstrate high social status by commitment to a cause, for example climate change. Other topics that allow in-group members to lay claim to moral high ground include political party or religion, diversity, inclusion, and equity, or anti-racism and critical race theory.



What these all have in common is that they do not require anything other than passion and self-identification to have the desired signaling effect. The ultimate aim for signing on to some of these causes may be to redistribute resources in different ways. Or to gain power and be able to be in charge of many of the decisions that will arise within working for the causes. But in the short-term, the social signaling aspect is a powerful reward in itself.

The problem with social virtue signaling as a status symbol is similar to that of accumulating wealth: "More" is better and there is no logical stopping point at which one can say enough is enough. Hence, we see people taking ever more radical positions to demonstrate they care more than others. Our current polarized politics are one manifestation, as are the fights you see in schools over systemic racism training, and in companies over unconscious bias and diversity training.

The danger of comparing to others

My point is not to criticize any particular cause or social group — they almost all have basic validity at some level. Rather, I want to draw attention to the idea that if you seek your relative value or worth in comparisons with others, you are demonstrating a "more" mindset: If only I had more _____, I would be happy.

Is there another way? How about living fully in the moment. When we do not dwell in the past or daydream about the future, we open ourselves to the possibility of finding tranquility and joy in what we are doing right now.

Success can mean saying “no”

I recently came across an example of a person who was successful at almost everything he tried, including things that appeared impossible before he came along and did them. The genius mathematician, [Edward O. Thorp](#), demonstrated that it was possible to beat the house playing blackjack, and then went on to spearhead the quantitative trading movement in financial markets, becoming wealthy in the process. His book [A Man For All Markets](#) is fantastic reading.

More impressive than his many intellectual and financial accomplishments, at least to me, were his decisions to stop playing the game. Thorp recognized that a "more" mindset could never be satisfied, and so thought about what was important to him in life. In his own words:

To preserve the quality of my life and to spend more of it in the company of people I value and in the exploration of ideas I enjoy, I chose not to follow up on a number of business ventures, although I believed that they were nearly certain to become extremely profitable.

Edward O. Thorp, *A Man for All Markets*

The [Stoic](#) philosopher, [Seneca](#), would celebrate Thorp, not for his many material accomplishments, but for having identified what was important to him and behaving accordingly. If that meant leaving money and accolades on the table, so be it. In this way, Thorp serves as one of the many good examples that we can follow.

You're there

The only thing I would wish you to seek more of is satisfaction. Your happiness will come from paying attention to what you are doing in the moment you are doing it.

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We do not need to be geniuses to follow in the footsteps of geniuses. They have blazed a path for us, and all we need to do is follow. It is up to us to choose our paths accordingly.

Be well.

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Bellerjeau shares thoughts on how to live a good life at [Klugne](#). You can also follow him on [LinkedIn](#).