The Arc of Ambition
Defining The Leadership Journey
By James Champy and Nitin Nohria
(Perseus Books, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2000)

Rating C - Save your money and time.

This book looks promising. Champy (the co-author) was one of the co-authors of the runaway bestseller Re-Engineering the Organization. The book’s appeal is obvious. Who today isn’t interested in leadership, and in particular finding and keeping more top talent than anyone else. We all know that highly ambitious stars are a real competitive advantage particularly in a knowledge-based profession such as law. Sadly it does not deliver. The Arc Of Ambition purports to point out the way for the Leadership Journey. It is my guess that it has left many readers lost and confused. It does provide an impressive list of winning ambitious leaders such as Bill Gates, Aristotle, Margaret Whitman (e-bay) and so forth along with some of their insights.

Aside from such stories (which, by the way, one can find in greater detail in Fast Company or Fortune) the book fails to provide any meaningful information about how to be a more effective leader. It also hopelessly confuses two very separate and distinct concepts—ambition and achievement.

The central theme is that there are three natural and archtypical stages to ambition and achievement and that there are nine steps or actions that will maximize a leader’s effectiveness in following his/her path. The three stages are the rise, apex and decline of ambition (for this we pay money?) and the various steps/chapters involve such things as ‘Seeing What Others Don’t’, ‘Inspire With A Greater Purpose’ and ‘Leaving Gracefully’.

Clearly, someone should have given these two authors a good dictionary. Most dictionaries define ambition as a desire for power, distinction and attainment. Achievement motivation, on the other hand, is defined by such professionals as Abraham Maslow, David McLelland and others who spent their lives studying and understanding it as something quite different. It is a higher level need to improve, create and to make a significant contribution. Sometimes highly ambitious people are also highly achievement focused but not always. History is full of Shakespearean tragic heroes with fatal flaws of unbridled ambition. Achievement motivation is something that, as any psychologist will tell you, you can never have too much of. It seeks to improve any and all situations and relationships in an ethical and positive way.

It is understandable that the authors missed the distinction between ambition and achievement as the Foreword to the book sets out a disclaimer that the book’s principles do not come from conventional psychology. Talk about tying your hands behind your back! It is simply impossible to write intelligently about such fundamental human qualities as ambition and achievement without the insight that psychology provides respecting these most basic aspects of human behaviour.

The authors would have perhaps been able to offer something meaningful if they had stayed with the good, bad and ugly of ambition, but by poaching on an area about which they appear to lack any real depth, i.e. achievement, their task became too ambitious.