

What Success Cannot Buy

The danger is not that ambition will make you powerful; it is that, pursued without self-knowledge, it may teach you to mistake control for love and possession for belonging.

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Ambition deserves respect. The desire to build something substantial, to win independence, to influence the world rather than merely endure it—these are not small motives, and they are not automatically corrupt. But ambition has a quiet danger: it can make a person so effective at acquiring power that he forgets to ask what power is doing to him. A business can grow while a character narrows. A reputation can expand while trust disappears. A person can get nearly everything he wants and still lose the things that make wanting worthwhile.

Charles Foster Kane is a warning precisely because he is not simply a villain. He is energetic, imaginative, disciplined, generous, and capable of extraordinary achievement. His newspaper begins as a dying publication and grows from a circulation of 26,000 to more than 200,000. His empire eventually includes dozens of newspapers, magazines, radio, and industrial enterprises. He takes financial losses in pursuit of the paper he believes should exist. He claims that it will tell the news honestly, quickly, and without special interests interfering with truth. There is real force in that vision. There is also real accomplishment in his execution.

The lesson, then, is not that success is empty or that wealth is shameful. The lesson is more demanding: achievement does not protect you from moral failure. In fact, achievement can make failure harder to see because it gives you the resources to keep acting on your mistakes.

Kane's first mistake is to confuse influence with understanding. His newspapers make him more newsworthy to millions of readers than the people in his own headlines. He can take positions on nearly every major public issue, attack opponents, shape attention, and make a headline seem important simply by making it large enough. Yet influence cannot guarantee trust. His journalism entertains readers, but, as Leland observes, it does not necessarily tell them the truth. His public principles and his methods begin to separate.

This is a familiar danger for anyone building an organization. The founder may begin with a genuine ideal, then gradually treat the ideal as something he owns. Once that happens, criticism feels like disloyalty, disagreement like betrayal, and persuasion

like permission to manipulate. Kane can claim to fight for ordinary people while also being a wealthy shareholder and publisher. He can believe both sides of that description. But sincerity does not erase contradiction. A person may honestly believe in a principle while repeatedly acting against it.

That is why you should measure success not only by growth, reach, or public approval, but also by what happens to your relationships under pressure. Are people around you free to disagree? Do they follow because they share the mission, or because employment is available? Leland asks whether Kane's recruited journalists truly share his values or merely work for the paper that hired them. That question belongs in every ambitious person's life. Loyalty that depends on your money or authority may be useful, but it is not the same as loyalty freely given.

Kane's private life reveals the cost of treating people as extensions of one's will. He wants love, but he wants it on his own terms. He expresses affection through money, buildings, protection, and opportunity. For Susan Alexander, he builds an opera house and uses his newspapers and influence to support her career. From the outside, this may resemble devotion. But Susan does not want the career. "It was his idea," she says. He treats her resistance as a problem to overcome, compelling her to continue performing even when she knows audiences do not want her.

This is where generosity becomes coercion. Giving someone resources is not the same as giving them freedom. Support ceases to be support when the recipient must use it according to the giver's design. Kane is not merely helping Susan become what she wishes to be; he is trying to make her become what will confirm his judgment, power, and love. The applause he manufactures cannot create genuine admiration. Three thousand people can be pressured to applaud, but they cannot be forced to feel what applause is supposed to mean.

The same pattern appears in his broader life. Kane collects enough objects for ten museums, "the loot of the world," yet cannot retain friendship, family, or belonging. He builds Xanadu after becoming disappointed in the world, creating an absolute monarchy of his own. It is a magnificent solution to disappointment-and a terrible solution to loneliness. A controlled world may exclude rejection, but it also excludes the freedom from which real affection comes.

His childhood helps us understand this pattern without excusing it. Kane is taken from his parents after his mother gives the bank control of his education, residence, and fortune. He resists the separation by striking Thatcher with his sled, then cries for his mother on the train. The sled later called Rosebud is tied to the last moment before that loss. It is reasonable to see Kane's later hunger for control, possessions, and devotion as connected to an early rupture. But explanation is not absolution. Pain may clarify why someone seeks control; it does not make controlling others harmless.

This distinction matters for an ambitious student because formative losses are easy to convert into professional goals. Independence can become a refusal ever to need anyone. Ownership can become a demand that no one leave. Public admiration can become an attempt to repair an old wound by making the world acknowledge your importance. Yet money, status, and power cannot purchase the particular thing they seem designed to replace. They can secure obedience, attention, and access. They cannot compel love. Indeed, the more aggressively they are used for that purpose, the less recognizable love becomes.

Kane's political defeat makes the boundary of power visible. Though he shapes public opinion, he never wins elected office. When a scandal involving Susan threatens his campaign, he refuses to withdraw, choosing defiance and pride even though his family's security is also at stake. His newspaper later claims the election was fraudulent, but the claim cannot restore legitimacy. Control over information cannot fully control what other people see.

The final warning is not simply that Kane becomes isolated. It is that he loses the ability to recognize why. When Susan leaves him after he strikes her, he pleads for her to stay, but his response reveals that he experiences her departure mainly as an injury to himself. He wants her love, yet he cannot receive her experience as separate from his own. He demands the feeling without accepting the freedom that would make it real.

You should therefore examine ambition by its relational consequences. If growth requires treating people as assets, if success makes disagreement dangerous, if generosity comes with obedience attached, or if public approval becomes proof of personal worth, the problem is not merely strategic. It is a warning about identity. The person who can command everything may eventually discover that no one near him is able to speak honestly, leave freely, or love without fear.

No single word explains a human life, and Rosebud is only one piece of Kane's larger puzzle. That complexity should not weaken the warning; it should sharpen it. Kane is simultaneously honest and crooked, idealistic and opportunistic, loving and destructive. So may any ambitious person become, unless he keeps asking what his victories are costing. Build the company, pursue influence, seek independence. But do not let the instruments of success become your definition of worth. The strongest life is not the one that possesses the most or commands the most. It is the one that can achieve greatly without destroying the people-and the capacity for love-that give achievement meaning.