

How To Create Your Value Hierarchy



If only the great Benjamin Franklin knew what you're about to, he may have been able to attain his desired "moral perfection".

We all know it's easier to hit a target that we can actually see. But what happens when we have 400 targets, that are all moving, coming in and out of existence?

It gets overwhelming. And exhausting, to say the least.

So we have to simplify. We have to prioritize.

But we can only prioritize once we know our goals, how to achieve them, and, probably most unknown, their influence on each other.

That's what led me to create the Three Laws of Pursuit. These "laws" have helped me clarify where I want to go while allowing me to have a singular, attainable focus. Think big, start small.

We all know this, but how do we embody it?

The First Law of Pursuit: Create Your Value Hierarchy

Your Value Hierarchy is a list of the behaviors and personal qualities of your ideal self. I'll get to why it's strictly behavioral in a minute, but first, a little more explanation. It's a set of personal values whose relative importance you create to prioritize what you care about and who you want to be.

This set of values can include anything from a desired habit, like exercise, to an already attained quality, like compassion.

The Hierarchy is a structure that you create and refine when you're thinking clearly so that, when you're overwhelmed or stuck, you can turn to it to re-mind yourself what your Priority is. Your Priority, we'll find, is [The ONE Thing](#) you ought to evaluate yourself on and no more.

It's designed to help you figure out what matters to you most so that, when life provides a fork, you know what to do, whether that's taking the advice of Yogi Berra or Robert Frost.

It's the reminder that you've done your introspection, have put in the hard work of strategic planning, and have already determined what has meaning to you, what your goals are, and the motivating [WHY](#) behind the scenes.

So, it's just a list of behaviors, huh? Where are the goals?

The goals are the behaviors. They don't start out that way, of course, but process-based goals, or systems, prove to be much more effective than outcome-based goals ([Mindset](#), Carol S. Dweck). That's not to say that outcome-based goals are useless. Quite the opposite actually, because they provide us with a starting point.

Probably due to the Western culture, our goals are usually very specific things or quantities like a new car, earn 10% more than last year, run a 7-minute mile. Very direct. Very specific.

The reason for this is most likely because it's a lot easier to tell whether or not we've achieved these goals. They're comfortable because they're tangible. And, as we know from Daniel Kahneman's work ([Thinking, Fast and Slow](#)), we are masters of substitution, always opting to answer the easier question.

But, the reason outcome-based goals aren't as good is because, oftentimes, we can't directly determine the result. There are so many external forces we can't control. What we can control, though, is the way we act: our behavior. Process-based.

The beauty of behavior is that, with the right approach and investment of mental energy, we can control it. To what extent? We don't know. So why sell ourselves short? I will always choose external limitations over internal ones. In other words, I'd rather be a tad too optimistic than not optimistic enough. I don't want to be my own limiter.

Let's turn to the original Serenity Prayer:

"[...] give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know one from the other." -Reinhold Niebuhr

Behaviors are the process-based goals that make the outcome-based goals more likely to happen.

The goal is simple. The goal is to give ourselves the best shot at reaching our goals. The goal is to get probability on our side.

Why is it important?

The reason it's so important to create a hierarchy is that it provides us with a meaningful reference point. And with it we can create meaningful motion.

In terms of deliberate self-development motion, is meaningless without direction.

Without a reference point—a desire, a goal, an ideal—then we are lost in motion. Running with our heads down. No perspective. I forgot where I heard this, but it's like the difference between running on a treadmill without purpose and running in a marathon.

Beyond that, in establishing relative importance between our Values upfront, we're deciding way up the Decision Delta, which saves a ton of mental energy.

So, instead of wasting mental resources deciding what's best at every turn, we've already determined what matters most on a larger scale. This brings back the power of priority and acts as permission to focus on the one thing that really matters.

The best decision is the one you only have to make once.

We don't have enough mental energy to care about everything.

Because the Hierarchy gives you a clear sense of your values it naturally devalues the trivialities, hence why they weren't important enough to make your Hierarchy in the first place. One of my unwritten rules (until now) is \approx if it's not at the top of the list, then don't think about it.

We have to be deliberate when deciding what we care about and to what extent we do because otherwise, we will spread ourselves thin. Knowing the extent to which we value things allows us to prioritize. And, as we know, prioritization has become a lost art, ever since "priority" became "priorities" in the 1900s ([Essentialism](#), Greg McKeown).

How do you choose between very important things?

"The habits that matter most are the ones that, when they start to shift, dislodge and remake other patterns." -Charles Duhigg, [The Power of Habit](#)

Keystone Qualities

One of the best ways I've found to determine what's most important is to answer this question: If attained, what Value is going to most positively impact the rest of my Values?

This echoes Gary Keller's and Tim Ferriss' clarifying questions:

Gary Keller: What is [The ONE Thing](#) I can do such that everything else becomes easier or unnecessary?

Tim Ferriss: Which one of these, if done, would render all the rest either easier or completely irrelevant?

The advantage of keystone habits is that they naturally affect other areas of our lives. There are several keystone habits—exercise, meditation, organization—and multiple studies have found that gaining any good habit has a positive impact in other areas. This is

most likely due to the increase in willpower, or mental energy ([The Willpower Instinct](#), Kelly McGonigal).

I refer to this impact-quality as “keystoniness” (mainly because it’s fun). We can look at our Values and use their keystone-ness to help us determine which to prioritize, but more on that in the exercise I’ll link to at the end of this article.

Extrinsic “meaning” vs intrinsic meaning

“Materialistic goals don’t lead to happiness; they isolate you and make you jealous and competitive. Happiness comes from efforts to connect with other people, to attain a sense of purpose in life, to deliberately seek joy in your day-to-day experience.” -Richard O’Conner, [Rewire](#)

The need for intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is changing. In a world that’s moving more towards creative tasks and away from rote ones, intrinsic motivation proves to be vital. In Daniel Pink’s [Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us](#), he reveals the relation of Type I behavior–intrinsically motivated behavior–to creativity and sustainable success.

Though there are times and places for Type X behavior–extrinsically motivated behavior–which is typically good for short-term success. Remember, think big, start small.

Habits are one place where Type X behavior can work because habits are algorithmic by definition. And one of the main qualifiers of habits is that they’ve become insensitive to reward.

So we can use extrinsic rewards as motivation, which will eventually become unnecessary to motivate the behavior. Though there’s a lot more to it, see my article on Habits for more.(Coming shortly.)

But, on a larger scale, why are so many of us creating outcome-based goals that entail this type of extrinsic reward?

It’s probably because we are creatures of symbol, and tangible symbols are easy for us to understand (see “substitution” below). Tangible symbols make the abstract much more edible. If you succeed, you get a car vs. If you succeed, you get...joy? What the hell is joy?

The car can get analyzed down to the very threads used in the leather whereas joy is at best described as a feeling. The most “tangible” we can make joy is by looking at the brain regions that are most active when we experience it...but that lacks everyday practicality.

The qualities we most value in life are often the hardest to understand and to quantify. One of the lessons that stuck with me from Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman's, [Thinking, Fast and Slow](#), is that our brains are “lazy”. That is, they are always trying to minimize their energy consumption, maximize their efficiency. And because we are lazy we often substitute hard questions for easier ones.

Ehemm...which is why we think we love extrinsic motivators: because they are easily categorized and measured. Extrinsic questions are simply easier. Easier to think about. Easier to pursue. Easier to know whether or not you've achieved them. Easier.

It's a cognitive heuristic we have to be aware of so that we can counteract it.

Again the outcome-based goal, or extrinsic motivation, is helpful. This is the reason we're creating a Hierarchy: as humans, we often crave clarity and structure.

If, instead of a hierarchy, we tried to produce a Value Web, whose center is constantly shifting, we would be hard-pressed to put it to good use. But, the web analogy is nonetheless our starting point. We need to use something like a web to find which Values are connected and to what extent they are. Their inter-relation.

Understanding these varying strengths and connections can help us determine which Values are the most important. Keystone-ness.

Think of the web as more realistic while the Hierarchy is more useful.

You decide, everyone's different.

A lifelong friend of mine loves the simple axiom: everyone's different. And now I do too. It's easy to mentally gloss over, but when you study it, you realize how deep it can go. Not only can it help instill compassion for others, but it can also help you create your own way and helps you be confident in its correctness...to you.

After all, you're the liver of your life. So you need to be the one determining your Values. Everything you read and everyone you talk to will give you different advice. It's up to you to determine what's most relevant to your life and your desires. (Most of us know this, but sometimes a simple reminder at the right time can have a big impact.)

So, in creating your Hierarchy, take care not to create it to please or impress others. We're going for character here, not reputation. Think internal truth, not external display. But, don't listen to me, everyone's different.

Your decision is not final, but pivot responsibly

Like the brain, your Hierarchy should find a balance between structure and plasticity. It'll be wise to really invest some mental energy upfront so that your Hierarchy isn't constantly shifting.

That said, circumstances change. We change. So we need a system that can change alongside our values while also providing necessary stability in an otherwise-unstable world.

You can always refine your Hierarchy as more information is gathered and your perspectives grow. Just remember to take care when pivoting from one Priority to another as you may fall victim to the same trap that Benjamin Franklin did (as you'll see below).

How does it work in practice?

Let's start with an example

When Benjamin Franklin was 20 he decided to strive for moral perfection. So he listed 13 Virtues that he wanted to practice and perfect. Each week he concentrated on one.

He then put all of the Virtues in a spreadsheet-like layout with each day of the week listed.

FORM OF THE PAGES.

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TEMPERANCE.

Eat not to dullness: drink not to elevation.

| | Sun. | M. | T. | W. | Th. | F. | S. |
|-------|------|----|----|----|-----|----|----|
| Tem. | | | | | | | |
| Sil. | * | * | | * | | * | |
| Ord. | * | * | * | | * | * | * |
| Res. | | * | | | | * | |
| Fru. | | * | | | | * | |
| Ind. | | | * | | | | |
| Sinc. | | | | | | | |
| Jus. | | | | | | | |
| Mod. | | | | | | | |
| Clea. | | | | | | | |
| Tran. | | | | | | | |
| Chas. | | | | | | | |
| Hum. | | | | | | | |

At the end of each day, he would mark down if he had completed his goal for each of the Virtues. At the end of each week he would make a new sheet like the previous one and shift his focus to the next Virtue on his list. Although he accomplished a hell of a lot, he did not attain moral perfection (by his own admission).

Let's go over his mistakes real quick and then look at a better approach to take. From there, we can go over the Three Laws of Pursuit.

The mistakes of Benjamin Franklin

1. He used arbitrary time periods

He may have had the intention of making these Virtues habit, but he lacked the right methodology.

2. He did not prioritize (even though he thought he did)

He evaluated his success on the Virtues simultaneously even though he was supposedly concentrating on one at a time. Web vs. Hierarchy.

This may be a good end goal—to be successful with all the Virtues—but it is much too difficult a starting point.

3. He had conflicting Virtues

With Virtues in conflict and a lack of priority he was constantly deciding what was more important and was unable to feel confident in his decisions, which likely drained his mental energy.

4. There was no hierarchy

Similar to the two above, he wasn't able to determine relative importance and thus lacked a narrow focus within his bigger desire. This gave him multiple directions instead of one and spread his efforts thin.

Correcting the mistakes of Benjamin Franklin

I've used our "Values" in place of his "Virtues".

1. Practice each Value until it becomes automatic

The goal is to make your Value become part of you: embodiment. You want to make it a habit so that no more mental energy is required to do it.

2. Prioritize

Live deliberately. Choose one Value to pursue. This will be the one at the top of your Hierarchy and is called your Priority. One at a time. Once it becomes automatic, then you can move to the next.

3. Choose Values that are aligned

If they can't be in perfect alignment, then determine which Value is more important with a bright-line rule so that you aren't constantly deciding which Value to focus on this time. Learn from Franklin.

4. Create a Hierarchy

Know the relative importance of your Values so you can focus on one at a time and not constantly wonder what your pursuit should be. This turns a would-be no-win situation into a clear cut win (where doing the more Valuable behavior is winning). This is why the upfront investment to create your Hierarchy is so important: it spares your mental energy down the road.

Create. Practice. Maintain.

Benjamin Franklin didn't have access to the neurological and psychological understandings we do today. But I bet that if he did, he would have practiced more deliberately and ended up closer to attaining his moral perfection.

It was by analyzing these mistakes of Benjamin Franklin that led me to some key principles of pursuit.

I'll label the principles simply first, then go over them a bit more in-depth.

The Three Laws of Pursuit

1. Create your Value Hierarchy
2. Practice your Priority until it's automatic, THEN move to your new Priority
3. Maintain your Values in order of importance

1. Create your Value Hierarchy

This article, the one you're reading now, is about creating your Value Hierarchy.

We've unspun the Web (or at least you will if you complete the exercise below). The relative importance of our Values helps us make what would have been tough decisions and, more importantly, helps us pursue our "goals".

2. Practice your Priority until it's automatic, THEN move to your new Priority

When we pick a habit-based Priority, our top Value to focus on, we expend our mental energy more effectively.

If, on the other hand, we don't prioritize, then we will be using our mental energy to no avail (like Franklin) because we'll constantly be pushing towards multiple tipping points without ever reaching any of them.

If you've ever played the board game Risk you know there's strength in concentrated numbers. If you try to expand too quickly though, you will spread yourself thin and become vulnerable. Secure a territory, then move on.

Remember, Benjamin Franklin thought he was focused. He thought he was concentrating on one Virtue at a time when instead he was evaluating all of them simultaneously, which gave way to conflicting goals and decreased his overall effectiveness.

Practice your Priority and no more. One at a time. No exceptions. If you don't agree, check out [the 17 weeks of mistakes](#) I made before I understood the economy of behavior. You can also read [The ONE Thing](#) by Gary Keller because he lays it out incredibly well.

As a little aside, you may be wondering, so I only do one thing? What about all the other Values that I've already gained? Good thought. The Values you have already gained are habitual, they are already part of you. You've reached embodiment.

The whole point of only pursuing your Priority is to save your limited mental energy. [Identity-based habits](#) don't require mental energy.

If you feel like you can do more than one at a time because they're "really easy" or think it's "not a big deal", then reflect for a second. Isn't that exactly the type of justification the person who gets burned out uses?

Isn't progress is all about sustainability? Again, this is simply my take on it. It's medicine I take because I believe sustainability is success. But, again, everyone's different.

3. Maintain your Values in order of importance

If a Value you've already attained starts to slip, or is starting to seem like a hassle, or requires effort, then maintaining it must become your new Priority. That's the power and logic behind the Hierarchy. If a previous Priority starts slipping, forget whatever other Value you're working on and make sure the more important one stays intact.

This will help combat overwhelm. It keeps things simple.

The whole point of the Hierarchy is to help you use your mental energy effectively. The reason we create the Hierarchy is to figure out what we value most so that we'll know ahead of time which Values to maintain at the expense of others, if necessary.

Remember, life is indifferent. The time to choose between your Values will come. The question is, will you be prepared?

Ready to create your Value Hierarchy? Here's [the exercise](#). (You may want to take our free 32-minute mini-course on habits [here](#).)