
Seattle Seahawks coach Pete Carroll puts it this way: “Do you have a life philosophy?”

For some of us, the question makes no sense. We might say: *Well, I have a lot of things I'm pursuing. A lot of goals. A lot of projects. Which do you mean?*

But others have no problem answering with conviction: *This is what I want.*

Everything becomes a bit clearer when you understand the level of the goal Pete is asking about. He's not asking about what you want to get done today, specifically, or even this year. He's asking what you're trying to get out of life. In grit terms, he's asking about your passion.

Pete's philosophy is: *Do things better than they have ever been done before.* Like with Jeff, it took a while to figure out what, in the broader sense, he was aiming for. The pivotal moment came at a low point in his coaching career: just after getting fired as head coach of the New England Patriots. This was the first and only year in his life when Pete wasn't playing or coaching football. At that juncture, one of his good friends urged him to consider something more abstract than which job to take next: “You've got to have a philosophy.”

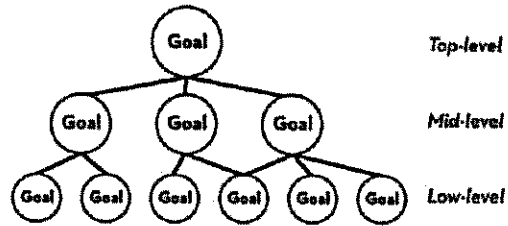
Pete realized he didn't have one and needed to: “If I was

ever going to get the chance to run an organization again, I would have to be prepared with a philosophy that would drive all my actions.” Pete did a lot of thinking and reflecting: “My life in the next weeks and months was filled with writing notes and filling binders.” At the same time, he was devouring the books of John Wooden, the legendary UCLA basketball coach who won a record-setting ten national championships.

Like a lot of coaches, Pete had already read Wooden. But this time, he was reading Wooden and understanding, at a much deeper level, what the coaching icon had to say. And the most important thing Wooden said was that, though a team has to do a million things well, figuring out the overarching vision is of utmost importance.

Pete realized in that moment that particular goals—winning a particular game, or even a seasonal championship, or figuring out this element of the offensive lineup, or the way to talk to players—needed coordination, needed purpose: “A clear, well-defined philosophy gives you the guidelines and boundaries that keep you on track,” he said.

One way to understand what Pete is talking about is to envision goals in a hierarchy.



At the bottom of this hierarchy are our most concrete and specific goals—the tasks we have on our short-term to-do list: I want to get out the door today by eight a.m. I want to call my business partner back. I want to finish writing the email I started yesterday. These low-level goals exist merely as *means to ends*. We want to accomplish them only because they get us something *else* we want. In contrast, the higher the goal in this hierarchy, the more abstract, general, and important it is. The higher the goal, the more it's an end in itself, and the less it's merely a *means* to an end.

In the diagram I've sketched out here, there are just three levels. That's an oversimplification. Between the lowest and the highest level might be several layers of mid-level goals. For instance, getting out the door by eight a.m. is a low-level goal. It only matters because of a mid-level goal: arriving at work on time. Why do you care about that? Because you want to be punctual. Why do you care about that? Because being punctual shows respect for the people

with whom you work. Why is that important? Because you strive to be a good leader.

If in the course of asking yourself these “Why?” questions your answer is simply “Just because!” then you know you've gotten to the top of a goal hierarchy. The top-level goal is not a means to any other end. It is, instead, an *end in itself*. Some psychologists like to call this an “ultimate concern.” Myself, I think of this top-level goal as a compass that gives direction and meaning to all the goals below it.

Consider Hall of Fame pitcher Tom Seaver. When he retired in 1987 at the age of forty-two, he'd compiled 311 wins; 3,640 strikeouts; 61 shutouts; and a 2.86 earned run average. In 1992, when Seaver was elected to the Hall of Fame, he received the highest-ever percentage of votes: 98.8 percent. During his twenty-year professional baseball career, Seaver aimed to pitch “the best I possibly can day after day, year after year.” Here is how that intention gave meaning and structure to all his lower-order goals:

Pitching . . . determines what I eat, when I go to bed, what I do when I'm awake. It determines how I spend my life when I'm not pitching. If it means I have to come to Florida and can't get tanned because I might get a burn that would keep me from throwing for a few days, then I never go

days, then I never go shirtless in the sun. . . . If it means I have to remind myself to pet dogs with my left hand or throw logs on the fire with my left hand, then I do that, too. If it means in the winter I eat cottage cheese instead of chocolate chip cookies in order to keep my weight down, then I eat cottage cheese.

The life Seaver described sounds grim. But that's not how Seaver saw things: "Pitching is what makes me happy. I've devoted my life to it. . . . I've made up my mind what I want to do. I'm happy when I pitch well so I only do things that help me be happy."

What I mean by passion is not just that you have something you care about. What I mean is that you care about that *same* ultimate goal in an abiding, loyal, steady way. You are not capricious. Each day, you wake up thinking of the questions you fell asleep thinking about. You are, in a sense, pointing in the same direction, ever eager to take even the smallest step forward than to take a step to the side, toward some other destination. At the extreme, one might call your focus obsessive. Most of your actions derive their significance from their allegiance to your ultimate concern, your life philosophy.

You have your priorities in order.

Grit is about holding the same top-level goal for a very long

time. Furthermore, this "life philosophy," as Pete Carroll might put it, is so interesting and important that it organizes a great deal of your waking activity. In very gritty people, most mid-level and low-level goals are, in some way or another, related to that ultimate goal. In contrast, a lack of grit can come from having less coherent goal structures.

Here are a few ways a lack of grit can show itself. I've met many young people who can articulate a dream—for example, to be a doctor or to play basketball in the NBA—and can vividly imagine how wonderful that would be, but they can't point to the mid-level and lower-level goals that will get them there. Their goal hierarchy has a top-level goal but no supporting mid-level or low-level goals:

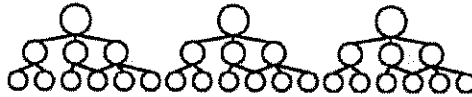


This is what my good friend and fellow psychologist Gabriele Oettingen calls "positive fantasizing." Gabriele's research suggests that indulging in visions of a positive future without figuring out how to get there, chiefly by considering what obstacles stand in the way, has short-term payoffs but long-term costs. In the short-term, you feel pretty great about your aspiration to be a doctor. In the long-term, you live with the disappointment of not having achieved your goal.

Even more common, I think, is having a bunch of mid-level goals that don't correspond to any unifying, top-level goal:



Or having a few competing goal hierarchies that aren't in any way connected with each other:



To some extent, goal conflict is a necessary feature of human existence. For instance, I have one goal hierarchy as a professional and another as a mother. Even Tom Seaver admits that the travel and practice schedule of a professional baseball player made it hard to spend as much time with his wife and children as he would have liked. So, though pitching was his professional passion, there were other goal hierarchies that obviously mattered to him.

Like Seaver, I have one goal hierarchy for work: *Use psychological science to help kids thrive*. But I have a separate goal hierarchy that involves being the best mother I can be to my two daughters. As any working parent knows, having two "ultimate concerns" isn't easy. There seems never to be enough time, energy, or attention to go around. I've decided to live with

that tension. As a young woman, I considered alternatives—not having my career or not raising a family—and decided that, morally, there was no "right decision," only a decision that was right for me.

So, the idea that every waking moment in our lives should be guided by one top-level goal is an idealized extreme that may not be desirable even for the grittiest of us. Still, I would argue that it's possible to pare down long lists of mid-level and low-level work goals according to how they serve a goal of supreme importance. And I think *one* top-level *professional* goal, rather than any other number, is ideal.

In sum, the more unified, aligned, and coordinated our goal hierarchies, the better.

Warren Buffett—the self-made multibillionaire whose personal wealth, acquired entirely within his own lifetime, is roughly twice the size of Harvard University's endowment—reportedly gave his pilot a simple three-step process for prioritizing.

The story goes like this: Buffett turns to his faithful pilot and says that he must have dreams greater than flying Buffett around to where he needs to go. The pilot confesses that, yes, he does. And then Buffett takes him through three steps.

First, you write down a list of twenty-five career goals.

Second, you do some soul-searching and circle the five highest-priority goals. Just five.

Third, you take a good hard look at the twenty goals you didn't circle. These you avoid at all costs. They're what distract you; they eat away time and energy, taking your eye from the goals that matter more.

When I first heard this story, I thought, *Who could have as many as twenty-five different career goals? That's kind of ridiculous, isn't it?* Then I started writing down on a piece of lined paper all of the projects I'm currently working on. When I got to line thirty-two, I realized that I could benefit from this exercise.

Interestingly, most of the goals I spontaneously thought of were mid-level goals. People generally default to that level of goal when they're asked to write down a number of goals, not just one.

To help me prioritize, I added columns that allowed me to sort out how interesting and important these projects were. I rated each goal on a scale from 1 to 10, from least to most interesting and then again from least to most important. I multiplied these numbers together to get a number from 1 to 100. None of my goals had an "interest x importance" rating as high as 100, but none were as low as 1, either.

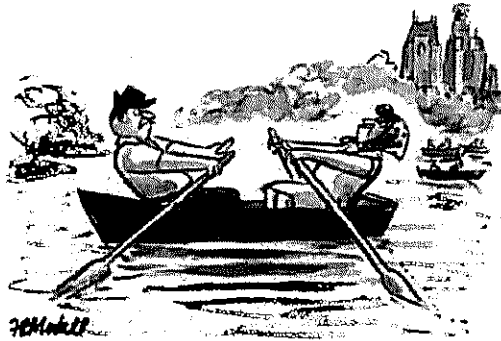
Then I tried to take Buffett's advice and circle just a few of the most interesting and important goals, relegating the rest to the avoid-at-all-cost category.

I tried, but I just couldn't do it.

After a day or so of wondering who was right—me or Warren Buffett—I realized that a lot of my goals were, in fact, related to one another. The majority, in fact, were means to ends, setting me up to make progress toward one ultimate goal: helping kids achieve and thrive. There were only a few professional goals for which this wasn't true. Reluctantly, I decided to put those on the avoid-at-all-cost list.

Now, if I could ever sit down with Buffett and go through my list with him (which is unlikely, since I doubt my needs rate a place in his goal hierarchy), he would surely tell me that the point of this exercise is to face the fact that time and energy are limited. Any successful person has to decide what to do in part by deciding what *not* to do. I get that. And I still have a ways to go on that count.

But I would also say that conventional prioritizing isn't enough. When you have to divide your actions among a number of very different high-level career goals, you're extremely conflicted. You need *one* internal compass—not two, three, four, or five.



Frank Modell, the *New Yorker*, July 7, 1962, The New Yorker Collection/The Cartoon Bank.

So, to Buffett's three-step exercise in prioritizing, I would add an additional step: Ask yourself, *To what extent do these goals serve a common purpose?* The more they're part of the same goal hierarchy—important because they then serve the same ultimate concern—the more focused your passion.

If you follow this method of prioritization, will you become a Hall of Fame pitcher or earn more money than anyone else in history? Probably not. But you'll stand a better chance of getting somewhere you care about—a better chance of moving closer to where you *want* to be.

When you see your goals organized in a hierarchy, you realize that grit is not at all about stubbornly pursuing—at all costs and ad infinitum—*every* single low-level goal on your list. In fact, you can expect to abandon a few of the things you're working very hard on at this moment. Not all of them will work out. Sure, you should try hard—even a little longer than you might think necessary. But don't beat your head against the wall attempting to follow through on something that is, merely, a means to a more important end.

I thought about how important it is to know how low-level goals fit into one's overall hierarchy when I listened to Roz Chast, the celebrated *New Yorker* cartoonist, give a talk at the local library. She told us her rejection rate is, at this stage in her