

To-Do Lists, Tactics, Strategies, and Going to the Moon

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Companies, governments, and other organizations are typically organized in the following way:

At the top of the pyramid are people whose job is to strategize for the organization. These are the people who set the entire tone for a group and define what it is supposed to accomplish.

- In the case of a war, for example, the president might declare that an overall strategy is to extinguish terrorists in Afghanistan, to make the world a safer place.
- In the case of an organization, a strategy may be to legalize something that is currently illegal.
- In the case of a company, a strategy may be to create a product that dominates a given sector.

Every group needs to have a strategic objective that is promoted by its leaders if it plans to survive in the long term. "Without a vision, the people perish."

The reason this is relevant to your career is that when you are choosing a company to work for, or even when you are governing your own life, it is absolutely crucial that a clear strategy is defined. You need a plan for your overall life and career that you are seeking to accomplish. I have met countless people throughout the years and asked them what they wanted to accomplish in their lives, and the responses I have gotten almost invariably reflect what eventually happens to them.

I once met a man who told me that his vision for his life was to own a bike store. At the time he was the president of a division of a major company. He had the right pedigree, schooling, and personality for his job at the time. However, his long-term goal was so inconsistent with what he was doing for work, I could not believe it. A few months after he told me about his goal, he lost his job and ended up dropping off the face of the earth. It was so strange what happened with him, but it was not difficult to believe. His overall objective ultimately led him to doing something different.

I have met so many people through the years who have absolutely no strategy. They may have gotten good grades and they may have gone to great schools. They may get jobs with the best companies and firms. However, the people without an overall strategy for what they want to accomplish with their life never rise very high. The people who head companies, governments, and other organizations, and who make these organizations thrive, are typically masters at setting strategy for both their personal overall objectives and those of the organizations they lead.

When I was practicing law, there was an attorney I worked with who used to keep meticulous "to-do" lists on her desk. She was a very good attorney and nothing ever managed to get by her. Each day she would do a new to-do list and she would prioritize different tasks based on what she had not completed the day before. She was an exceptional attorney who was well respected by the partners and others in the law firm. During a time when the best [attorneys in the law firm](#) were getting elected to become partners, this woman was one of the chosen few. I was not surprised and I do not think anyone ever was surprised by this. This attorney was very good at accomplishing everything on her to-do lists, and at the time I would have been willing to bet that becoming partner had always been at the top of her long-term accomplishment list.

I came to know this girl quite well, having spent some time around her and other people at the firm. The thing was that she actually had no major goals in particular for her life. She just did her job as well as she could do it, and creating small daily goals just worked very well for her to progress in her career. I want to be clear that this girl was also generally what you might call a *super achiever*. She had attended Harvard Law School, was on law review in law school, and had also clerked for a very prestigious judge. Today, this woman is still a partner in this law firm, and I am confident she makes an excellent living and is doing exceedingly well in her law career. There are thousands of people like this in many of the most prestigious positions throughout the country. Many of these people I have known over the years have arrived at their positions due to continually setting daily and weekly goals. Goals, to-do lists, and so forth are very powerful things. In fact, if you are not setting daily to-do lists and goals, you are really short-changing yourself. Without utilizing these tools you will accomplish far, far less with your time.

People who do not create daily and weekly to-do lists spend most of their time reacting to various things that happen to them throughout the day. These people may spend more time than necessary on phone calls, whether personal or business-related, spend more time than necessary at lunch cavorting with coworkers, and so forth. They will spend more time on unimportant tasks than necessary and less time on important tasks. Their days will meander along with lower levels of accomplishment and productivity than they might otherwise have--if they were just willing to set some goals. The person who goes into an office or job each day without a "to-do" list or a clear set of goals, will always be problematic because his or her efforts will be scattered and less focused, as compared to the efforts of those who do set daily goals.

This particular woman will always be successful wherever she goes. However, I highly doubt she will ever become a political leader, lead the law firm, start a law firm, or do anything like this with her life. In fact, she will probably spend her entire life doing exactly what she is doing right now. The reason is that she is someone who has mastered the art of being *tactical*, but who does not have an overall understanding of strategy. In many respects, strategy is far more important than tactics. *Strategic plans* are the long-term and grander objective that is to be accomplished, and the *tactics* are the means for each individual to do a given task.

I know many people who have become famous, incredibly successful, wealthy, and so forth. I am privileged and fortunate to know these people, and from these relationships I have been able to learn what has worked and what has not worked in helping people attain success. In every single case, prior to these people reaching incredible heights in their careers and lives, they always had a major overarching strategy. For example:

- "I want to be an internationally famous movie star."

- "I want to start the most profitable large law firm in California."
- "I want to inspire millions of people through my work."
- "I want to be an incredibly rich plastic surgeon."

These are all things that I have heard people say back when they were just average Jane Does and John Does--who, years later, emerged on the side of something fantastic that they did with their lives. The most successful super achievers out there accomplish incredible results due to simply having a strategy. When you have a strategy, everything else falls into place.

To succeed in any job, you need to have the following: (1) a personal expectation of daily and weekly goals you can write down and meet, or (2) a good manager who gives you certain daily and weekly goals you can meet. Beyond this, you need a strategy. In every job it is essential that you are working with a company or organization with a concrete strategy, and that you amass a helpful set of assumptions that relate to the tactics you are to follow in your job.

The attorney in the above example set her own expectations and goals. This is generally how it is for most attorneys. After a few years attorneys become quite independent in much of their work and know various procedures and whatever may need to be done in the matters they work on. They are given a great deal of independence in terms of how they are to work, and much of what they do involves responding to court deadlines, client deadlines, and doing various work in response to different needs that may arise. Clearly an attorney who creates lists of daily and weekly goals is likely to accomplish much more throughout the day than one who does not. In addition, by using to-do lists, this attorney, being so focused and organized, is unlikely to miss or forget to tend to various tasks.

Attorneys who do not set various daily or weekly goals are likely to miss a lot of important deadlines. They are likely to not be as productive as they could be in various work-related matters, and their careers and productivity will suffer as a result. These are the sorts of attorneys who end up getting fired.

In contrast, the attorney who has explicit goals day to day knows what is expected of his or her performance at all times. An experienced attorney knows when certain things are to be done and is prepared to get them accomplished according to deadline. These skills are earned through experience; for instance, at one time or another, most [successful attorneys](#) were micromanaged and were given smaller assignments as young attorneys. Most jobs out there are not like this. In fact, the "average job" of an executive, or any other worker, requires that the person meet certain targets or objectives that he or she receives from a manager.

In a well-run organization in which the employee does not learn or know instinctively what he or she is supposed to be doing, there are typically managers at various levels who give the employee tasks to do and objectives to meet. These managers at various levels are assisting the organization in carrying out its overall strategy and strategic objective.

Most companies and organizations have what are called *middle managers*. The role of a middle manager is typically to ensure that the strategic objectives requested from the higher-level executives are carried out by the lower ranks. The middle manager may be told to start selling certain amounts of given product in the state of New Hampshire and may therefore recruit a force of salespeople and others to assist with the task. The middle manager may [recruit salespeople](#), set goals for the sales team, and get others to assist in carrying out this objective. Good middle managers will have a series of goals and other measurements to ensure that the people they are supervising are meeting their goals. The people working for the middle manager will be required to meet a series of tactical targets in order to reach their specific goals. Typically, the middle manager will also be given a list of goals by upper management, which makes clear what goals the manager and his team are required to meet.

The higher up you go on the food chain in any organization, the more strategy is involved. The lower you go on the food chain in any organization, the more tactics are involved. Typically, before any worker or person can be in charge of setting strategy, he or she must prove an ability to follow instructions and be tactical.

In your job, it is extremely important that you are working for managers and organizations that are skilled in both being strategic and setting tactical requirements for your work. An organization without any particular strategy is unlikely to survive for long. The reason for this is that the people working within the organization are never going to have much of an idea as to what they should be doing. They may go about their jobs, for example, but their actions will be inefficient and scattered. People will be hired inappropriately and fired inappropriately. People inside the organization may not be given coherent or measurable orders by their managers. It is important that you are always working for a good manager; the more organized the manager the better. You can only meet goals and accomplish various tasks when you know exactly what is required of you. Similarly, a manager can only tell you what is required of you when he or she too would have been given tactical goals to follow in pursuit of a strategic objective.

If you were to drop a bunch of scientists (or workers in any profession) into an office building and tell them to "do something useful," most likely nothing productive would occur. Without a leader, everyone would just do their own thing. Without a goal or focus, people would basically sit around doing not much of anything, twiddling their thumbs all day. This would be the beginning of a very strange sort of company or organization; however, surprisingly, this sort of thing happens all the time in government agencies, businesses, and other organizations. Without any direction, people are also extremely unhappy and do not like their jobs. A business set up like this does not position itself to succeed in the long run.

Now, if you were to get a group of scientists together and state: "Build a rocket to go to the moon in less than ten years.," something very different would occur. One of my favorite speeches is President John F. Kennedy's May 25, 1961, address to Congress, in which he sets the *strategic objective* of going to the moon:

I therefore ask the Congress, above and beyond the increases I have earlier requested for space activities, to provide the funds which are needed to meet the following national goals:

First, I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth. No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space; and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish. We propose to accelerate the development of the appropriate lunar space craft. We propose to develop alternate liquid and solid fuel boosters, much larger than any now being developed, until certain which is superior. We propose additional funds for other engine development and for unmanned explorations--explorations which are particularly important for one purpose which this nation will never overlook: the survival of the man who first makes this daring flight. But in a very real sense, it will not be one man going to the moon--if we make this judgment affirmatively, it will be an entire nation. For all of us must work to put him there.

Secondly, an additional 23 million dollars, together with 7 million dollars already available, will accelerate development of the Rover nuclear rocket. This gives promise of some day providing a means for even more exciting and ambitious exploration of space, perhaps beyond the moon, perhaps to the very end of the solar system itself.

Third, an additional 50 million dollars will make the most of our present leadership, by accelerating the use of space satellites for world-wide communications.

Fourth, an additional 75 million dollars--of which 53 million dollars is for the Weather Bureau--will help give us at the earliest possible time a satellite system for world-wide weather observation.

Let it be clear--and this is a judgment which the Members of the Congress must finally make--let it be clear that I am asking the Congress and the country to accept a firm commitment to a new course of action, a course which will last for many years and carry very heavy costs: 531 million dollars in fiscal '62--an estimated seven to nine billion dollars additional over the next five years. If we are to go only half way, or reduce our sights in the face of difficulty, in my judgment it would be better not to go at all.

Now this is a choice which this country must make, and I am confident that under the leadership of the Space Committees of the Congress, and the Appropriating Committees, that you will consider the matter carefully.

It is a most important decision that we make as a nation. But all of you have lived through the last four years and have seen the significance of space and the adventures in space, and no one can predict with certainty what the ultimate meaning will be of mastery of space.

I believe we should go to the moon. But I think every citizen of this country as well as the Members of the Congress should consider the matter carefully in making their judgment, to which we have given attention over many weeks and months, because it is a heavy burden, and there is no sense in agreeing or desiring that the United States take an affirmative position in outer space, unless we are prepared to do the work and bear the burdens to make it successful. If we are not, we should decide today and this year.

This decision demands a major national commitment of scientific and technical manpower, material and facilities, and the possibility of their diversion from other important activities where they are already thinly spread. It means a degree of dedication, organization and discipline which have not always characterized our research and development efforts. It means we cannot afford undue work stoppages, inflated costs of material or talent, wasteful interagency rivalries, or a high turnover of key personnel.

New objectives and new money cannot solve these problems. They could in fact, aggravate them further--unless every scientist, every engineer, every serviceman, every technician, contractor, and civil servant gives his personal pledge that this nation will move forward, with the full speed of freedom, in the exciting adventure of space.

An organization and the people inside an organization, who have tactical as well as strategic objectives are always able to function far better than those who do not.

The employees will be given orders, goals, and so forth that are to be met, and they will know that if they are on task, they will be doing what is expected of them in their job. A law firm, for example, may tell its attorneys that they are "required" to bill 1,800 hours a year. As long as the attorneys do this, they presumably are meeting their goals. How the attorneys meet this goal is up to them--as long as they meet it. They are responsible for managing their day-to-day tasks and activities in order to achieve this objective. With goals they are required to meet, employees know what to do--and when employees know what to do, they can be effective with their time and can contribute to the organization's objectives. If employees do not have a series of tactical objectives they can follow, they will not be able, in most companies and organizations, to succeed as they should.

You need to be part of a company with a strategic objective and you should seek out companies with strategic objectives that you believe in. However, it is not simply enough for a company to have a strategic objective. The company must also have managers and others who are constantly setting goals and tactical objectives in coordination with their managers, to reach the longer-term strategic objectives. I would encourage you to create to-do lists on a daily basis that are taking you toward your goals.

The most crucial first step, though, is devising an overall strategic objective for your life and career. You need to know where you are going. There is power in to-do lists, but before creating any to-do list, the most important thing you can do is set a goal for where you want your to-do list to take you. And then, eventually, you will get there.

THE LESSON

No organization or person will succeed for long without a strategy; be part of a company with a strategic objective. Furthermore, you must develop your own overall strategic objectives for you life and career. Create daily to-do lists that will bring you closer to your goals; such tools keep you focused and enable you to accomplish far more than those without a strategy.