

RETHINK ALL THE RULES - THE COST OF GREATNESS

Author's Note

*After 14 years of writing this Leadership and HR column for the Findley Reports, I'm closing it out with one final arc. This will be a short, focused series called **Rethink All the Rules**. Each piece will explore one of the areas I've returned to again and again over the years: the team, the self, and the leader. Thank you for reading along all this time. I hope you find these last few pieces both useful and thought-provoking.*

When I was younger, I had a level of ambition that felt endless. I threw myself into work the way only a young and slightly naïve person can. I was grinding through long hours, chasing the next milestone, trying to prove something to myself and the world. I had a vision for my career, and I pressed hard toward it. What I didn't realize was that ambition always comes with a price. I learned that the hard way. I became versions of myself I didn't like. I let certain relationships thin out. I ignored parts of my life that mattered.

If you're reading this, there's a good chance you've experienced the cost of ambition as well. Maybe you've been the one burning the candle at both ends. Or maybe you've watched someone on your team (smart, talented, driven) go so hard they started to come undone.

Ambition is baked into the DNA of leadership, especially in this industry. But somewhere along the way, we start to see the trade-offs. Time. Energy. Identity. Relationships. And those trade-offs don't always feel like choices. They feel like inevitabilities.

But here's the thing: ambition isn't the problem. Being driven isn't a bad thing. Wanting to build something, lead something, or change something is a common trait for great leaders.

The real danger is unconscious ambition. That's when we try to do everything at once. When we chase every opportunity without pausing to ask what we're sacrificing. That's when talented people burn out, stall out, or slowly become someone they never meant to be.

If you've ever felt that tension (between what you're building and what it's costing) you're not alone. The truth is, you can only be great at a few things, and greatness always demands trade-offs. That's not defeat. That's strategy.

If we want ambition to serve us instead of drain us, we have to be clear: What are we willing to trade? What are we determined to protect?

The Power of Choosing Your Core Four

Here's the first truth that most people never say out loud: your ambition is a choice.

It's not something life forced on you. If you want to be great at something (your career, your craft, the business you're building) that's a choice you've made. And it's a good one. But you have to treat it as such. You're not stuck with ambition; you're owning it. And if you're going to own it, you also have to own what comes next: choosing what else matters just as much.

This is where high achievers start to stumble. They try to hold onto everything. They want to be the standout leader and the perfect partner, and the super-present parent, and the community pillar, and the wellness guru, and the adventurer, and the lifelong learner. They build an ideal life out of seven or ten priorities. Each one is meaningful, and each one demands time and energy they don't actually have.

It's no wonder so many burn out or stall out. They're chasing an equation that doesn't add up.

So here's the shift: **If you truly want to pursue greatness, you have to choose.**



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In my work with leaders and ambitious professionals, I use a tool called the **Core Four**. It's brutally simple, and that's what makes it effective. It starts with your **greatness ambition** - the one goal or pursuit where you want to be exceptional. That's priority one. Then, you identify just **three more non-negotiables** that you'll protect alongside it.

Not five. Not seven. Four. Total.

This is where most people push back. They say, "But all these things matter to me." Of course they do. But you can't give your best to everything. Choosing the Core Four means being intentional. It means sacrificing the things you like so you can fully commit to the things you love.

To help you choose those three remaining priorities, I use something called the Meaningful 12. These are the twelve most common areas people try to prioritize. These are things like family, fitness, friendships, faith, finances, and more. You'll likely want all of them. But your task is to pick just three that you refuse to sacrifice, no matter what.

Complete Your Core Four From the Meaningful 12

You can't prioritize everything. If you want to achieve something great, you need to be ruthless about what else truly matters. These twelve categories represent the most common areas people try to hold onto. The challenge? You only get three.

As you read through them, ask: *Which would I regret sacrificing? Which one would I rank #1 most critical to me?*

1. **Career Growth** - Advancing in your field, gaining influence, or building something of your own. Examples: Promotions, launching a business
2. **Children** - Being actively present in your kids' lives. Examples: School events, quality time, teaching values
3. **Community Involvement** - Contributing to causes or people beyond yourself. Examples: Volunteering, mentoring, civic leadership
4. **Faith & Spirituality** - Connecting to your beliefs or a deeper sense of meaning. Examples: Meditation, worship, values alignment
5. **Financial Success** - Creating freedom and stability through money. Examples: Saving, investing, supporting a lifestyle
6. **Friends & Extended Family** - Maintaining meaningful relationships beyond your inner circle. Examples: Staying connected, showing up for milestones
7. **Fun & Recreation** - Making space for joy, play, and adventure. Examples: Travel, hobbies, creative outlets
8. **Learning & Growth** - Constantly evolving, inside or outside of work. Examples: Courses, reading, new Skills
9. **Nutrition & Food** - Fueling your body and enjoying food intentionally. Examples: Healthy eating, cooking, shared meals
10. **Physical Fitness** - Building strength, energy, and endurance. Examples: Workouts, yoga, sports
11. **Rest & Recovery** - Protecting energy and avoiding burnout. Examples: Sleep, breaks, mindfulness
12. **Spouse/Partner** - Nurturing your most important relationship. Examples: Quality time, shared goals



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How to Make Your Core Four Work in Real Life

Landing on your Core Four is a huge step. But if you want to live it (not just think about it) these three principles will take your ambition and clarity to the next level.

1) **Rank Your Priorities** - Not all four are equal, and that's the point. When life throws you a conflict (your ambition collides with your kids, or your health is competing with your partner's needs) you need to know what wins. Your "greatness" ambition might not be your #1 priority. That's okay. But something has to be. Make the hard calls now, so when the trade-offs come (and they will), you already know what to protect.

2) **Own Your Choices** - People will have opinions. Some might not understand why you're saying no. You might even second-guess yourself when you see others "doing it all." But this is your list. You chose these priorities for a reason. If they matter enough to make the cut, they matter enough to defend without feeling guilt. Living by your Core Four means being okay with not being everything to everyone.

3) **Look for Integration, Not Balance** - Balance sounds good, but it's a trap. Trying to split your time evenly across all four priorities will only leave you stretched thin and frustrated. Instead, find overlaps that reinforce each other:

- Workout time that doubles as family time
- Career projects that align with your long-term ambition
- Social plans that are actually fun and recharge you

The more your Core Four align and support each other, the easier it becomes to live them fully without burning out.

The Hardest Part Comes Next

Choosing your Core Four is one thing. Living it is another. I don't just say that... I've lived it. When I finally got clear on my own Core Four (my ambition, my wife, my kids, and my health) it gave me the clarity I needed. But it didn't make life easier. It made it real. It meant I had to start saying no to things I used to say yes to.

No to late-night dinners with friends I love. No to chasing recognition that didn't serve my deeper goals. No to extra sleep, because the only time I could work on my ambition was after the house was quiet.

And it wasn't just about the external trade-offs. The biggest battle was with myself. Guilt. FOMO. That constant itch to prove I could still "do it all." The pressure to be a great parent, a great partner, a high performer, a leader, a coach and to still make it all look easy.

But here's what I've learned: no one else is going to protect your Core Four for you. No one's going to hand you time or permission or space. You have to fight for it. Every day.

Because if these really are the four most important things in your life, then they're worth fighting for even when it's uncomfortable. Especially then. If you won't fight for them, who will?

So let me leave you with one question: Are you really willing to fight for the life you say you want?

That's the real test. And it starts now.



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Author's Note

This is the final arc of my Leadership and HR column for the Findley Reports, but I'm continuing the conversation in a new format.

*You can connect with me on LinkedIn and subscribe to my newsletter, **Rethink All the Rules**, where I'll keep sharing the same kind of provocative and practical guidance to help you improve yourself, your leadership, and your team's performance.*

If this piece resonated, I'd love to see you there.

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