

Goal-setting: (NOT) for dummies

BHAGs, SMART, SMART-er, HARD, FAST, HEART goals etc....so many cute acronyms, but so little progress on our actual goals!! Sounds a little harsh, well consider this...



In 2007 Prof. Richard Wiseman tracked the success of the New Year's resolutions made by 3000 people. A mere 12% of them managed to achieve what they set out to do! Wiseman noted that the successful people didn't achieve their goals through willpower alone. In this article I will explain why and how goals work; the pitfalls to avoid when setting them; and provide a practical goal setting template that will increase your likelihood of success.

Does goal setting work and why?

Professors Edwin A. Locke and Gary P. Latham, (academic pioneers in this field) have shown that irrespective of the complexity of the work (from logging to engineering), or time frames from 60 seconds - 25 years, setting goals and providing feedback does increase productivity.

Goals do this by focussing our limited energies and time allocation. Goals also energise and sustain us, especially stretch goals, if we make them public. This is due to cognitive dissonance - we don't like a gap between our public persona and our real selves. Goals in addition, provide direction and a sense of fulfilment when we achieve them, not to mention the flush of dopamine hormones. One of the key stress management tools taught to Navy Seal is goal setting. When you engage your pre-frontal cortex (where reasoning and planning happens) via goal setting, it keeps the amygdala in check (emotional centre), that wants to move you to fight or flight. This had such a profound effect, that it in conjunction with three other techniques (visualisation, breathing and self-talk), it improved their completion success rate of the selection phase by a remarkable 33%.

In 2002, Prof. Locke and Latham wrote an article in *American Psychologist* [summarizing their 35 years of research](#). Among their counter-intuitive findings they found that:

- Setting specific, difficult goals consistently leads to higher performance than just urging people to do their best.
- High goals generate greater effort than low goals, and the highest or most difficult goals produce the greatest levels of effort and performance.

- Tight deadlines lead to a more rapid work pace than loose deadlines.
- When goals are set by the person having to deliver on them, they tend to set harder goals, especially if they are self-confident.

Whilst the research is clear that goal setting is beneficial, there are traps to be aware of:

a) Not all goals are created equal: Approach vs. avoidance goals

How do you construct your goals? Where possible construct them as approach goals.

Approach goals	Avoidance goals
Want mindset - possibilities and opportunities.	Should mindset – threat/self-protection.
Elicits positive memories and triumphs. Play to win. Less procrastination and higher excitement.	Elicits negative experiences, play to not lose. If have greater number of avoidance goals - less satisfaction with progress on personal goals and life, decreased self-esteem, personal control and vitality and feeling less competent in relation to goal pursuits.
Useful for longer-term success, goal and task mastery.	Useful in the short-term: combatting immediate gratification moments e.g. don't eat that extra cake!
Example: I will move the company forward. I am going to gym to be strong, energetic and fit.	Example: I will avoid making the company fail. I am going to gym to avoid heart disease.

(Based on insights from Andrew Elliot and Ken Sheldon, respected researcher in the approach - avoidance goals domain).

b) Too much of good thing - Goal overload.

There is a dark side to goal setting, and for some people the endless pursuit of “more” leads to the eventual result of “less”. Three key indicators of burnout are emotional exhaustion, cynicism and inefficacy. To prevent goal generated burnout consider the following:

- Emotional exhaustion recovery: Organize your goals in a hierarchy to better manage what you do (and know why you do what you do); be aware of each task's perceived attainability and limit any unnecessary tasks.

- Cynicism recovery: Look at the major goals and the sub-goals that need to be completed and determine if they're approach – or avoidance-focused goals.
 - Reframe avoidance-focused goals into approach-focused.
 - If there are any avoidance focused goals that need to remain, apply implementation intentions (I will take certain actions on a specific day and time).
- Inefficacy recovery: At each level of your goal hierarchy, determine which tasks are “want-to” and “have-to”.
 - Create additional “want-to” tasks to ensure there are equal number of both.
 - Rank the “have-to” tasks by priority at each level.
 - Alternate between the “want-to” and “have-to” tasks at each level.

If you would like to delve into this further, go to: <https://psychologycompass.com/blog/burnout-recovery-guide/>

c) Careful what you wish for. Visualisation gone wrong!

Imagine your ideal future, perfect partner or dream job. This kind of visualisation makes you think life will be wonderful. Unfortunately, when obstacles come along you will be more likely to be discouraged, as Penn University researchers found when conducting these experiments. You should rather visualise: the actual process steps, not a dream of the future.

So how can you set goals effectively?

In my 20 plus years as an organisational psychologist in high performance environments, these are the insights I have gained regarding what really works in terms of goal setting....

a) Goal value

Purpose driven: many people are quite driven, but the real question should be: “To what end?” If the goal doesn't serve something that is truly valuable to yourself or others, what is the point?

Emotions invoking goals: so often we set goals that are quite cerebral, but we need to also acknowledge that for long-lasting change we must appeal to the heart as well. Prof Kotter, the granddaddy of change management from Harvard has been preaching this philosophy for years.

Commitment levels litmus test: if you score below a 7/10, then it's likely you won't persevere, put this goal to the side until it becomes more important to you.

Confidence: when people doubt the likelihood of success, they decrease their efforts. Realistically boost your chances by looking at what skills, knowledge, experience or support you need to have a realistic chance at succeeding. Ensure you capture these in the antidotes section of the table.

b) Goal structuring

Action plan: write your steps down in granular detail, using a process step approach.

Measure success: this can be a combination of qualitative (I feel more positive about my body) and quantitative metrics (I lost 10 kgs in 3 months).

Punishment and reward: we know from behavioural economics that humans are influenced by loss aversion. For sustained change we need BOTH upside (rewards) and downside (punitive).

c) Reality check

Key obstacles and antidotes: I often hear from delegates: "Back in reality, I didn't implement because..." Why would you detach yourself from reality in the first place!! By identifying, and then creating action plans for these potential obstacles we mitigate decision-making fatigue and leverage off "If then psychology" pioneered by Peter Gollwitzer.

Support: goals are often penned in a vacuum, not acknowledging certain key interdependencies. By identifying and gaining key peoples support, we increase the likelihood of meaningful change. Goal setting is a team sport.

Other considerations:

- Have only 1-3 goals. Changing a lot of things at once is more difficult, experience the glow of success by narrowing your focus.
- Make it a habit - <https://charlesduhigg.com/books/the-power-of-habit/>
- Don't beat yourself up and quit if you sometimes revert to old habits-, just treat it as a temporary setback.

Herewith is an example of a goal setting template and a blank template for your use:

GOAL EXAMPLE

What is my goal and why is it NB to me?

I will have exceptional vitality, in a sustainable and healthy way. This goal is crucial to me as it provides the energy for me to achieve my goals and deal with the obstacles I will need to overcome.

Achieving this goal would make a real difference to me emotionally (Y/N)?

I am 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 committed to achieving this goal.


I am 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 confident in achieving this goal.

	Action plan	How measure goal success	Completed by when and reward/penalty
Goal structuring	<p>Nutrition: balanced Mediterranean diet-2000 cal. per day.</p> <p>Rest: sleep 7-8 hrs per day. Have one day off per week from all work and exercise.</p> <p>Exercise: be involved in a variety of physical activities, that amounts to 10 hrs per week. 6 hrs cycling (Mon, Tue, Thur), 2 hrs tennis (Sun), 2 hr HITT (Wed & Sat).</p> <p>Work: write for first 2 hrs per day-passion.</p>	<p>Weight: target weight is 77 kgs, body fat 12%. Measure daily.</p> <p>Sleep: assess quality and quantity with sleep app.</p> <p>Exercise: track time and intensity with Strava (cycling) & Apple Watch.</p> <p>Health: annual executive health assessment that independently checks all important physical parameters.</p>	<p>Interim reward(s): new cycling kit.</p> <p>Long-term reward: overseas trip to watch Roland Garros Grand Slam tennis with friends if effectively embed for a year.</p> <p>Punishment: donate same amount of money as overseas tennis trip to Barmy Army rugby supporters club.</p>
Key obstacles e.g. accessibility, affordability, attractiveness etc.	<h3>Obstacles</h3> <p>Scientific knowledge regarding latest physical exercise and nutrition practices.</p>		<h3>Antidotes</h3> <p>Go to a personal trainer once a week to ensure progress is tracked, and latest exercise techniques are learnt, specifically High Intensity Interval Training and functional training, dynamic stretching. Have a nutritionist assess my basal metabolic rate, and then develop a nutrition plan that will allow me to body fat in a sustainable and healthy manner.</p>
Support	<p>I need Wendy (wife) to modify what we eat for dinners to accommodate my new eating plan.</p> <p>Friends: socialise less around eating/drinking and more around healthy outdoor activities together e.g. mountain walks, surfing and the beach.</p>		

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Support			

In conclusion:

Goals starve your distractions and feed your focus.

Happy 2019.