How to Set a Goal

How do we set goals? Consider what you want to achieve, and then commit to it. Set SMART (specific, measureable, attainable, relevant and time-bound) goals that motivate you and write them down to make them feel tangible. Then plan the steps you must take to realize your goal, and cross off each one as you work through them.

Many people feel as if they're adrift in the world. They work hard, but they don't seem to get anywhere worthwhile.

A key reason that they feel this way is that they haven't spent enough time thinking about what they want from life, and haven't set themselves formal goals. After all, would you set out on a major journey with no real idea of your destination? Probably not!

Goal setting is a powerful process for thinking about your ideal future, and for motivating yourself to turn your vision of this future into reality.

The process of setting goals helps you choose where you want to go in life. By knowing precisely what you want to achieve, you know where you have to concentrate your efforts. You'll also quickly spot the distractions that can, so easily, lead you astray.

Why Set Goals?

Top-level athletes, successful business-people and achievers in all fields all set goals. Setting goals gives you long-term vision and short-term motivation. It focuses your acquisition of knowledge, and helps you to organize your time and your resources so that you can make the very most of your life.

By setting sharp, clearly defined goals, you can measure and take pride in the achievement of those goals, and you'll see forward progress in what might previously have seemed a long pointless grind. You will also raise your self-confidence, as you recognize your own ability and competence in achieving the goals that you've set.

Starting to Set Personal Goals

You set your goals on a number of levels:

- First you create your "big picture" of what you want to do with your life (or over, say, the next 10 years), and identify the large-scale goals that you want to achieve.
- Then, you break these down into the smaller and smaller targets that you must hit to reach your lifetime goals.
- Finally, once you have your plan, you start working on it to achieve these goals.

This is why we start the process of setting goals by looking at your lifetime goals. Then, we work down to the things that you can do in, say, the next five years, then next year, next month, next week, and today, to start moving towards them.

Step 1: Setting Lifetime Goals

The first step in setting personal goals is to consider what you want to achieve in your lifetime (or at least, by a significant and distant age in the future). Setting lifetime goals gives you the overall perspective that shapes all other aspects of your decision making.

To give a broad, balanced coverage of all important areas in your life, try to set goals in some of the following categories (or in other categories of your own, where these are important to you):

- Career – What level do you want to reach in your career, or what do you want to achieve?
- Financial – How much do you want to earn, by what stage? How is this related to your career goals?
- Education – Is there any knowledge you want to acquire in particular? What information and skills will you need to have in order to achieve other goals?
- Family – Do you want to be a parent? If so, how are you going to be a good parent? How do you want to be seen by a partner or by members of your extended family?
- Artistic – Do you want to achieve any artistic goals?
- Attitude – Is any part of your mindset holding you back? Is there any part of the way that you behave that upsets you? (If so, set a goal to improve your behavior or find a solution to the problem.)
- Physical – Are there any athletic goals that you want to achieve, or do you want good health deep into old age? What steps are you going to take to achieve this?
- Pleasure – How do you want to enjoy yourself? (You should ensure that some of your life is for you!)
- Public Service – Do you want to make the world a better place? If so, how?

Spend some time brainstorming these things, and then select one or more goals in each category that best reflect what you want to do. Then consider trimming again so that you have a small number of really significant goals that you can focus on.

As you do this, make sure that the goals that you have set are ones that you genuinely want to achieve, not ones that your parents, family, or employers might want. (If you have a partner, you probably want to consider what he or she wants – however, make sure that you also remain true to yourself!)

Step 2: Setting Smaller Goals

Once you have set your lifetime goals, set a five-year plan of smaller goals that you need to complete if you are to reach your lifetime plan.

Then create a one-year plan, six-month plan, and a one-month plan of progressively smaller goals that you should reach to achieve your lifetime goals. Each of these should be based on the previous plan.

Then create a daily To-Do List of things that you should do today to work towards your lifetime goals.

At an early stage, your smaller goals might be to read books and gather information on the achievement of your higher level goals. This will help you to improve the quality and realism of your goal setting.

Finally review your plans, and make sure that they fit the way in which you want to live your life.

Staying on Course

Once you've decided on your first set of goals, keep the process going by reviewing and updating your To-Do List on a daily basis.

Periodically review the longer term plans, and modify them to reflect your changing priorities and experience. (A good way of doing this is to schedule regular, repeating reviews using a computer-based diary.)

SMART Goals

A useful way of making goals more powerful is to use the SMART Goal philosophy

- S – Specific (or Significant).
- M – Measurable (or Meaningful).
- A – Attainable (or Action-Oriented).
- R – Relevant (or Rewarding).
- T – Time-bound (or Trackable).

For example, instead of having "to sail around the world" as a goal, it's more powerful to use the SMART goal "To have completed my trip around the world by December 31, 2015." Obviously, this will only be attainable if a lot of preparation has been completed beforehand!

Further Tips for Setting Your Goals

The following broad guidelines will help you to set effective, achievable goals:

- State each goal as a positive statement – Express your goals positively – "Execute this technique well" is a much better goal than "Don't make this stupid mistake."
- Be precise: Set precise goals, putting in dates, times and amounts so that you can measure achievement. If you do this, you'll know exactly when you have achieved the goal, and can take complete satisfaction from having achieved it.
- Set priorities – When you have several goals, give each a priority. This helps you to avoid feeling overwhelmed by having too many goals, and helps to direct your attention to the most important ones.
- Write goals down – This crystallizes them and gives them more force.
- Keep operational goals small – Keep the low-level goals that you're working towards small and achievable. If a goal is too large, then it can seem that you are not making progress towards it. Keeping goals small and incremental gives more opportunities for reward.
- Set performance goals, not outcome goals – You should take care to set goals over which you have as much control as possible. It can be quite dispiriting to fail to achieve a personal goal for reasons beyond your control! In business, these reasons could be bad business environments or unexpected effects of government policy. In sport, they could include poor judging, bad weather, injury, or just plain bad luck. If you base your goals on personal performance, then you can keep control over the achievement of your goals, and draw satisfaction from them.
- Set realistic goals – It's important to set goals that you can achieve. All sorts of people (for example, employers, parents, media, or society) can set unrealistic goals for you. They will often do this in ignorance of your own desires and ambitions. It's also possible to set goals that are too difficult because you might not appreciate either the obstacles in the way, or understand quite how much skill you need to develop to achieve a particular level of performance.

Achieving Goals

When you've achieved a goal, take the time to enjoy the satisfaction of having done so. Absorb the implications of the goal achievement, and observe the progress that you've made towards other goals.

If the goal was a significant one, reward yourself appropriately. All of this helps you build the self-confidence you deserve.

With the experience of having achieved this goal, review the rest of your goal plans:

- If you achieved the goal too easily, make your next goal harder.
- If the goal took a dispiriting length of time to achieve, make the next goal a little easier.
- If you learned something that would lead you to change other goals, do so.
- If you noticed a deficit in your skills despite achieving the goal, decide whether to set goals to fix this.

It's important to remember that failing to meet goals does not matter much, just as long as you learn from the experience.

Feed lessons you have learned back into the process of setting your next goals. Remember too that your goals will change as time goes on. Adjust them regularly to reflect growth in your knowledge and experience, and if goals do not hold any attraction any longer, consider letting them go.

Example Personal Goals

For her New Year's Resolution, Susan has decided to think about what she really wants to do with her life. Her lifetime goals are as follows:

- Career – "To be managing editor of the magazine that I work for."
- Artistic – "To keep working on my illustration skills. Ultimately I want to have my own show in our downtown gallery."
- Physical – "To run a marathon."

Now that Susan has listed her lifetime goals, she then breaks down each one into smaller, more manageable goals.

Let's take a closer look at how she might break down her lifetime career goal – becoming managing editor of her magazine:

- Five-year goal: "Become deputy editor."
- One-year goal: "Volunteer for projects that the current Managing Editor is heading up."
- Six-month goal: "Go back to school and finish my journalism degree."
- One-month goal: "Talk to the current managing editor to determine what skills are needed to do the job."
- One-week goal: "Book the meeting with the Managing Editor."

As you can see from this example, breaking big goals down into smaller, more manageable goals makes it far easier to see how the goal will get accomplished.

Key Points

Goal setting is an important method of:

- Deciding what you want to achieve in your life.
- Separating what's important from what's irrelevant, or a distraction.
- Motivating yourself.
- Building your self-confidence, based on successful achievement of goals.

Set your lifetime goals first. Then, set a five-year plan of smaller goals that you need to complete if you are to reach your lifetime plan. Keep the process going by regularly reviewing and updating your goals. And remember to take time to enjoy the satisfaction of achieving your goals when you do so.

If you don't already set goals, do so, starting now. As you make this technique part of your life, you'll find your career accelerating, and you'll wonder how you did without it!