

YOURBIZ

When Goals Fall Flat!

A few months ago a gentleman named Henry came to visit me in my office at Rice University. He was in sales — a tall, fit, attractive man wearing a crisp pinstriped suit with a bright, eye-catching tie — clearly successful. His visit was unannounced.

"Excuse me, Dr. Eliot," he said in a professionally polite manner as he knocked on a hinge of my open door. "Might I steal a moment of your time?"

I motioned him in, inviting him to have a seat as I fired off a last-minute email.

"If you're busy, perhaps I can come at a better time?"

"Not at all," I told him, swiveling my desk chair in his direction to focus my attention. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, it's kind of a long story. I'm a pharmaceutical rep for Pfizer — a good one. In fact, last year I was the number one leading producer in the United States. But I'm not happy. I'm miserable. I go to every Pfizer function religiously. I volunteer by mentoring younger sales reps. My boss thinks I walk on water; I've been taking night courses here at the Jones School to work toward my MBA and my resume is the best in the business ... but it just doesn't matter. It's killing me."

Henry then reached across my desk, thrusting his wrists toward me, palms up, as if tied together: "You've got to help me get these handcuffs off!"

He was exasperated. Here was a man earning (pardon my rough calculation) a couple million dollars in annual commissions, yet desperately seeking help. Odd? Actually, quite common.

As we talked at greater length, I discovered that Henry had fallen into the trap of relying on goal setting to navigate his career and define his success — to define him.

I see it in every line of business: bright, talented men and women who've had success or are working toward their next achievement but are stuck in the office 15 hours a day, who don't spend enough time with their kids or take vacations with their spouses, who don't enjoy hobbies, who don't exercise or eat right. They get caught up creating and checking off to-do lists for all of their personal and professional responsibilities. They're socially rewarded for their diligence or conscientiousness, but they long for a sense of freedom ... even a mere few minutes would be a reprieve!

Goal setting, as a tool, has its utility. We all need a compass. We all need a dream that excites the living daylights out of us, helping us spring out of bed in the morning with vibrancy and enthusiasm. If you hit your snooze alarm seven times before

forcing yourself to the chore of trudging into the bathroom, looking forward only to a stiff cup of coffee, you clearly need some goals — positive, exciting ones enwrapped in a vision of the kind of lifestyle that makes you feel a sense of resonance with the world.

That's why I use the word dream. It resonates more with who we are and the fundamentals of human motivation. Dreams are about, at their core, feeling and emotion, passion and revelation. Dreams are internal standards you want to live by — guides ... not rigid outcomes to artificially judge yourself against.

In my work with top executives, surgeons, artists, and athletes, I see too many people held back by goal setting; people who use this tool to set laundry lists of exercises and meaningless accomplishment measures. They are unsatisfied with their careers, out of balance between work and life.

The reason? Goal setting has five significant downsides when it comes to happiness, exuberance, and a true sense of fulfillment:

PERFECTIONISM

Goals, by definition, are ideals — where you want to be and how you're going to arrive there. The disconnect is that the real world gets in the way. Plans and schedules are never absolute. Clients and colleagues change their minds. Weather rolls in unexpectedly. Politics emanating from Washington shift after an election. The economy rises and falls.

If you ascribe to goal setting to set your course, it's easy to lock yourself into too narrow a definition of success. Write your goals down and review them feverishly every single day, and you'll miss opportunities, I guarantee it. Think of the billion-dollar products on the market that came about because of mistakes, that weren't planned out or systematically engineered, or weren't intended for greatness: Post-it Notes, Silly Putty, the microwave oven, Newman's Own foods, Velcro, Teflon ... the list is a mile long.

There isn't one path to excellence. In fact, the most successful people in this world twist along pronouncedly convoluted paths. In doing so, they also learn that success and perfectionism are not synonyms. For most, thinking that there is such a thing as perfect is a sure way to impede growth.

IMPATIENCE

The famous achievers in history have a number of psychological traits in common. Vision is first on the list. They can stretch their minds to look at existing problems in fresh and interesting ways, breakthrough ways; they can see through details, obstacles, and setbacks — loads of them. The rest of our population is stuck in the minutia.

When you orient your time and thinking around a list of goals, by definition, you pay more attention to the details. You constantly assess how much work is left to reach an end point, how close or far you are from your goals — you evaluate far too much.

Frequent comparison between where you are at this moment and where you'd rather be is not vision; it's impatience. Real vision is confidence, problem solving, understanding the bigger picture, not delaying happiness until you attain a certain measure of prosperity. Excess goal setting, in turn, doesn't lead to vision; it leads to increased frustration.

Take a baseball player, for example. If he sets a goal of hitting .400 for the season, he introduces pressure to monitor his "progress." Is he batting .380? How many more hits does he need to raise his average? How many more turns at the plate are left? Years of sports science research has shown that kind of thinking to be deleterious to on-field production. Constant evaluation ties performers up in knots.

THINKING IN THE FUTURE

A funny thing about true visionaries: They don't actually spend much time thinking about the future. Contrary to popular conception, they aren't idealists always mentally wandering into fantasyland. Yes, they can see well down the road, but they use that ability to keep their motivation strong. When they arise in the morning, as they brush their teeth, they think of great things to come. When they fall asleep at night, it's to content musings of the enjoyable day ahead. And, when they run into roadblocks, they remind themselves of their potential. That's what effective goal setting is really all about!

In between those brief moments, they actually have no idea what the future will bring. If you interrupted them at work, asking for predictions or odds, you'd likely receive a confused stare, or a retort: "Why are you bothering me with such nonsense? Can't you see I'm busy?" Busy thinking in the present, that is.

Top-level performance happens when you are engrossed in the moment, absorbed in the thrill of what you are doing.

Mozart once described the art of writing music as child's play. An interviewer, assuming him to be conceited, questioned the statement: "In other words, you're just that talented?" "No," explained Mozart, "concertos become art when you lose yourself in the process, like a child stringing cranberries onto a thread, one at a time, not paying attention to anything else going on around them, least of all their mother calling them for dinner."

If you want big accomplishments, unwavering happiness one of them, you need to spend a significant portion of your workday absorbed, moment to moment, in the present. Goal setting takes you out of the present.

OUTCOME ORIENTATION

Let's face it, on any given day, there are an enormous number of distractions to derail our momentum. There's no doubt that sustaining motivation is key to success.

So what is the driving force that keeps us juiced? Intrinsic value, not extrinsic reward. A gold star on your report card, cashing your year-end bonus check, moving into the corner office, a Porsche in the driveway ... they certainly seem incentivizing. But they don't hold up day in and day out; they don't generate sustained motivation.

If you place a carrot at the end of your health club's treadmill, it may propel you the first time you go for a jog. Before long, though, you'll say, "Screw this; I'm going to Starbucks."

The lesson is that outcomes — byproducts of our effort — can't hold our attention to nearly the magnitude of internal rewards: the real meaning of what we do, purpose, resonance we feel when executing something the right way or for the right reason.

To that end, it is FAR more effective to focus on the process, not what you might be given if the process goes well.

EXCESS PLANNING

The fifth downside of goal setting is reduction in work altogether. Simply put: Elaborate goal-setting designs, like those espoused in psychology textbooks, take hours to build, and even longer to implement. How often do you hear of sales forces or executive teams flying off for three- and four-day retreats ... to redefine their goals, to complete "productivity" seminars? It tends to be a lot of wasted time.

Instead of pouring yourself into work that you enjoy, work that will translate into results and make a difference, spend your time writing down goals, monitoring them, reorganizing and reprioritizing them, entering them into spreadsheets and Palm Pilots. Where will you end up? No need to answer that question.

Goal setting is, at its essence, planning. The more energy you put into planning, the less energy you put into execution.

As we say in sports, "Champions get after it."

So ask yourself, are you going to transform your work and personal life with perfectionism, impatience, daydreaming, sweating after a dollar, and planning to re-plan? Or are you going to be like Henry and ditch the handcuffs?

YOUR SUCCESS STARTS HERE

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