



## GOAL-SETTING

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*"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?", asked Alice*

*"That depends a good deal on where you want to go to", said the Cat*

*"I don't much care where", said Alice*

*"Then it doesn't matter which way you go", said the Cat*

*Lewis Carroll  
From Alice in Wonderland*

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No doubt most of you are familiar with goal-setting. While goal-setting is generally acknowledged as an important technique for success, it is my experience that there a large number of athletes who are missing out on an opportunity to prepare themselves adequately by either not setting goals or by setting goals that are not appropriate.

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how you can use goal setting to improve your success. Before discussing the specifics of an appropriate goal-setting program, let us consider why goal setting improves performances. Psychologists Edwin Locke and Gary Latham, who have been working in the goal-setting area for many years, have identified four reasons why goal setting may increase an individual's performance.

\* Provides direction - It has been suggested that goal setting tends to give an individual direction. And, as we all know, it is very difficult to get where we want to without direction. The words of the Cat in the Alice in Wonderland classic quote above certainly ring true in this regard. Similarly, rather than trying to simply hustle more (which gives little direction), an ice hockey player may set the goal of beating his man to the puck more times than his opponent beats him. By setting this goal the player is directing himself to focus on defensive play as opposed to offensive play, team strategy,

and so on.

\* Regulation of effort expenditure - It is generally accepted that the energy that individuals will put into any task is proportional to the difficulty of the goal. This assumes, of course, that the individual accepts the goal and is committed to achieving it.

I am sure that each of us has experienced this phenomenon before, either through planning or by accident. For example, finding out that the bus is leaving in one hour rather than two, and still getting all those last minute preparations done. In this example, and many others that could be cited, the individual accomplished the same task under two different time lines. The only difference in the two completion times was that the individual would have had to work harder to get the job done in the shorter time thus lending credence to the suggestion that setting a more difficult goal makes one work harder.

\* Facilitates persistence - The setting of appropriate goals also appears to facilitate performance because individuals tend to keep exerting themselves until the goal is attained.

It is generally believed that an individual who has set a realistic goal will continue striving toward that goal until it is accomplished. For instance, when individuals can see where they are heading, they are more likely to keep persisting until they reach that goal. On the other hand, when there is no goal in place, it is much easier to give in without really applying much effort.

It has been my experience, for instance, that sprinters who train without concrete goals are more likely to stop when they start to feel tired, regardless of how much they have trained already. However, sprinters who have the goal of completing 10, 100-metre sprints at the end of training are likely to complete these, even though they are likely to feel fatigued long before they finish.

\* Strategy development - I am sure that most of you have heard the saying, "Where there is a will, there is a way." Well, this saying is very consistent with one of the ways that goal setting can improve performance.

It is thought that goal setting often results in the development of new strategies that will allow individuals a better opportunity of attaining their goals.

Having outlined some of the basic ways that goal setting can influence performance, let us now turn to looking at the specifics of a good goal-setting program.

### Goal-setting Specifics

1. Measurable - To be effective, goals must be measurable. If the goals are not measurable then there is little or no

opportunity for individuals to get feedback about their competence. For instance, if a golfer's goal is to simply to improve his driving, he is probably going to find it difficult to obtain any feedback about his competence because nothing has been measured. On the other hand, if the golfer's goal is to improve his driving skills by hitting 7 out of 10 tee shots from the middle of the fairway to the right rough, then the individual's performance can be judged by comparing it to the measurable goal that has been identified.

There is also another side to making your goals measurable. As soon as you take the time to measure something, it tends to get done. There is something about making things measurable that prompts action. It has been my experience that when something moves from the abstract to something tangible, there is generally a flurry of action.

2. Specific - In identifying your goals, it is also important that the goals be specific. If a goal is to be of any use, it needs to give the individual a direction. Saying to yourself that you just want to do your best is not enough. In fact, it has been known for a long time that "do your best" goals are often too ambiguous. For one thing, it is not clear what one has to do "to do one's best" and secondly, how do you know when you have attained it?

What are specific goals? They are goals that provide a specific direction for your behaviours.

Here are a few selected examples:

- make 60 per cent of my first serves in my next 3 matches.
- beat my opponent to the ball more times than he beats me to the ball.
- hit the top left corner on 70 per cent of my shots from 8 metres out

In each of these examples, the goal was specific enough to provide the individual with a predetermined course of action.

3. Challenging - It is also important to note that the specific goals selected must also be challenging goals. That is, they should reflect the individual's current level of ability. Challenging goals are ones that are neither too easy nor too difficult. They are realistic for the individual for that situation at that point in time.

Accomplishment of goals that are too easy provide individuals with little information to make them feel confident in future situations. On the other hand, the selection of goals that are extremely difficult will do little to enhance your self-confidence and, in fact, may contribute to a lowering of self-confidence if the goals set are so difficult that they are never accomplished.

4. Short versus long-term goals - In any goal-setting program, it is necessary that both short-and long-term goals be set.

Long-term goals comprise what I like to call the "grand plan." The grand plan is simply a vision of what or where you would like to be sometime in the future.

*"If you can dream it, you can do it. Always remember that this whole thing was started by a mouse."*

*Walt Disney*

There are two important points about long-term goals that should be noted. First, these long-term goals provide individuals with a direction. They serve as a vision to the future and it is important that they are kept in mind as the individual progresses toward them.

According to Dennis Conner, the skipper of the winning yacht in three America's Cup races, the goal that you set yourself must be very visible and important to you. For instance, as preparation for the 1987 America's Cup, Conner reported that he held a very visible image in his head of the final America's Cup scoreboard. Two weeks before the final racing series started, Conner reported in a magazine article that, "It reads Conner 4, Australia zip. I go through it in my head all the time." And, that is how the series finished with Conner winning. The rest, as they say, is history.

Second, it is not necessary that you have the necessary resources to reach these long-term goals at this point in time. This is an important point because a large number of athletes base their goals (if they make any at all!) on the resources they have available to them at the present time. Successful athletes, on the other hand, tend to make their long-term goals and then go out and find the resources to obtain them. They also turn their attention to translating these visions into short-term goals that can be acted upon immediately.

*"You build a successful life a day at a time"*

*Lou Holtz*

In 1972 Mark Spitz won seven gold medals, breaking seven world records. I was at home watching him on my living room floor. And I said to myself at the time, "wouldn't it be nice to be able to win a gold medal, to be a world champion in Olympic competition." So right then I had this dream of being an Olympic champion. But right about then it became a goal. That dream to goal transition is the biggest thing I learned prior to Olympic competition - how important it is to set a goal. Certainly, motivation is important. A lot of kids have motivation. *"Gee, I'd love to be great..."*

Having established his long-term goal, Naber went on to describe how he turned this vision of being an Olympic champion into a series of short-term goals that he could believe in and act on.

*"My personal best in the 100 back was 59.9. Roland Matthes, winning the same event for the second consecutive Olympics (1972), went 56.3. I extrapolated his, you know, three Olympic performances and I figured in 1976, 55.5 would have been the order of the day. That's what I figured I would have to do. So I'm four seconds off the shortest backstroke event on the Olympic program. It's the equivalent of dropping four seconds in the 440 yard dash. It's a substantial chunk. But because it's a goal, now I can decisively figure out how I can attack that. I have four years to do it in. I'm watching TV in 1972. I've got four years to train. So it's only one second a year. That's still a substantial chunk. Swimmers train ten or eleven months a year so it's about a tenth of a second a month, giving time off for missed workouts. And you figure we train six days a week so it's only about 1/300th of a second a day. We train from six to eight in the morning and four to six at night so it's really only about 1/1200th of a second every hour. Do you know how short a 1200th of a second is? Look at my hand and blink when I snap, would you please? OK, from the time when your eyelids started to close to the time they touched, five 1200th of a second elapsed. For me to stand on a pool deck and say, "During the next 60 minutes I'm going to improve that much, "that's a believable dream. I can believe in myself. I can't believe that I'm going to drop four seconds by the next Olympics. But I can believe I can get that much faster. Couldn't you? Sure. So all of a sudden I'm moving."*

*John Naber*

As the above example illustrates, short-term goals can provide the immediate incentives for any long-term goal that is too far removed in time to be effective in directing an individual as to what is necessary to do now. The trick is to be able to restructure your long-term goal into credible short-term goals.

Furthermore, these short-term goals need not be large, as illustrated in the following quote by swimmer Alex Baumann, a double gold medalist at the 1984 Olympics:

*"To keep pushing through all that training, what works for me is setting small goals for myself...I concentrate on improving in small ways, rather than improving by large amounts. After attaining each goal, I feel totally satisfied and I can go on to another goal...Setting small, short-term goals, has really helped me"*

*Alex Baumann*

5. Performance versus outcome goals - The proper implementation of a goal-setting program also requires that an individual distinguish between performance and outcome goals. An outcome goal is just as it sounds - a result. For instance, winning the gold medal, scoring the most points, getting the most hits, are all outcome goals.

Performance goals, on the other hand, are the means by which the outcome goals will be achieved.

How do you achieve the outcome goal of being the fastest swimmer? Since it is patently clear that the attainment of this goal necessitates touching the wall first, to many individuals it would seem superfluous to set any additional goals, except to simply "Go for it!" But, when you think about it, there are a number of ways by which this goal may be achieved. For example, several performance goals that could result in the achievement of the outcome goal to be the fastest swimmer include:

- getting a quick start
- carrying out race strategy correctly
- executing effective turns
- kicking at the right time

While many other performance goals could be listed, the main point to be conveyed in this example concerns the identification of all relevant performance goals by which the outcome goal can be attained. You are probably asking yourself why it is necessary to go to all this trouble to identify relevant performance goals. While there are a number of reasons, in terms of self-confidence, the attainment of an outcome goal (i.e., to win!) requires that the individual surpasses the performance of other individuals. Now, it needs to be made clear that I am not saying that outcome or winning is not important. It is! However, problems do surface when we focus exclusively on outcome goals.

By focusing on outcome, an individual's self-confidence is often based on a favourable comparison with other competitors. Thus, it is quite possible that individuals who initially feel self-confident may fall apart when they see the competition. Yet, to be fair it needs to be recognized that the elimination of this comparison is not easy.

*"I don't play against opponents. I play against the game"*

*Larry Bird*

There is another advantage to identifying relevant performance goals. As mentioned elsewhere, outcome is often beyond our control, whereas individual performance measures are not. Quite logically, it is much easier to be confident approaching something that you know that you can control versus something that you have little or no control over. For example, you would likely approach a tennis match with much more confidence if your goals were to get 60 per cent of first serves in, hit 70 per cent of your strokes to your opponent's backhand, hit 80 per cent of your ground strokes to within 1 metre of the baseline and so on versus simply having the goal to win. In the former situation, these are all performance goals that you can control, whereas the latter

outcome goal contains a number of aspects that you cannot control, primarily your opponent's play on the day.

The setting of performance goals also circumvents the tendency of athletes to attend to the novel, uncertain aspects in new tasks. This type of focus only tends to make individuals a little more uncertain about how they are going to perform. However, the focus on what is familiar and clearly within one's range of skills (that can be attained by setting appropriate performance goals based on one's current capabilities) can only serve to heighten self-confidence.

Finally, the use of multiple performance goals in a situation allows individuals the opportunity to achieve success even in situations where a winning outcome is precluded. Furthermore, the success from the attainment of these performance goals becomes positive feedback which serves to enhance the individual's self-confidence even when the ultimate outcome has been a failure.

6. Monitoring - The final criterion in a goal-setting program concerns the monitoring of the goals. There are several reasons for monitoring progress toward our goals. First, monitoring indicates how far you have progressed toward your goal. As you get closer, the motivation gets better. A situation analogous to sighting the finishing line in a marathon race. Second, monitoring tells you when your goals have been attained and as you attain each goal, a feeling of accomplishment will increase your confidence in your skills. Finally, monitoring may provide you with information that indicates that your goal is inappropriate and may need modification.

Basically, monitoring provides individuals with the feedback they need to assess the effectiveness of the goals that they have set. If the feedback suggests that they are at or above the level of the goal, then self-confidence increases whereas, if feedback suggests that performance is below standard, corrective techniques can be implemented before self-confidence starts to decline significantly. The key is to ensure that monitoring is done at regular intervals. These intervals will vary with the time frame associated with each goal. For instance, a year-long goal may require monthly monitoring whereas a monthly goal may require weekly monitoring.

Before leaving this chapter, you should attempt to construct some goals using the principles that have just been outlined. To get you started, try to set a long-term goal and appropriate short-term goals for yourself in an area where there is something important that you wish to accomplish. If you have trouble, go back and review the relevant sections of this chapter.