

## ALL ABOUT GOALS: HINTS AND TIPS FROM THE DRS DEXTER

Goal setting is now well established in coaching and popular psychology as a 'must'. The world is littered with 'truisms' that if you put your wishes into the universe they may start to come true, that if you set targets you will be more inclined to meet them and so on. How does this happen?

While we might like to think that there's a magic attached to success in goal setting (which there may be – wouldn't that be great!) so there is also a kind of logic, because once we know what we want, how we want our future to be, look, feel and even hear, so we begin to notice the opportunities and resources around us which might lead us towards their achievement. So, if I know that I want to be at peace in an environment of warmth which enhances my ability to be creative, so I might begin to notice places or people that might lead me towards achieving my retreat.

Goal setting is not just arbitrary – on the contrary, smart goal setting can be the best thing you'll ever do. So let's have a little look at the research based evidence for the efficacy of goal setting, and at some of the common sense explanation of 'folklore' understanding of goals.

### SO, WHY GOALS?

So, when we begin to move clients forward, then, we set goals for a reason. Goal setting has been carefully researched, and it has been discovered that they are useful if they are:

- **Sufficiently difficult to be challenging.** If a goal is too easy – *by the end of today I will have finished this sentence* – then incentive is not maximised. Conversely, too difficult is overwhelming – *by the end of today I will have written all 60,000 words of this book*. The highest level of effort is found where goals are moderately difficult.
- **Clearly stated.** It is not enough to have the general idea – *I want to write a book about coaching*. There need to be specific parameters – *I would like to write a 60,000 word textbook for students of coaching which will be a practical and theoretical resource up to Diploma level*.
- **Must have commitment.** So in our example, the commitment to the goal comes from the belief that *a book will have a great deal of value in the world of coaching training: will also give a great sense of achieving a creative task which is challenging: and enable the authors to be engaged in the development of the coaching profession*. In corporate coaching, commitment is key to satisfactory goal achievement.
- Another factor to make goals effective is that of **receiving feedback**. So, as I sit writing my book, it's important that I have some way of knowing *how many words I'm writing*, to feel some sense of progress within the task, to know that the gap is closing between my start point and my finish point. Later on there will be other kinds of feedback, critical subjectivity on the quality, numbers who read or buy the book. And, whilst actually performing the task, there needs to be feedback which can indicate *change and measurement*.

- Finally, there needs to be **task complexity**. So that as well as challenging, the task needs to demand a certain amount of discovery of strategies to complete it, in order to optimise motivation. Using higher and varied skills leads to significantly higher performance. So, to write a book on coaching is fine and challenging, *to write a book which is concurrent with academic research and knowledge, and which offers practical ideas, and which draws on previous experience; and which includes examples and exercises for readers to participate* is likely to elicit a better performance than 'writing a book on coaching'.

So how do we set goals which are likely to work?

For a long time now, we have used prompts to engage in goal setting which we have borrowed from Gerard Egan. Egan's associates dubbed these prompts the 'willy wobblers', as they contained so many 'w's. They go like this, where 'it' refers to 'life', or 'the future', or 'the situation':

- What would it look like if it were just a tiny bit better?
- What Would it Look Like if it Were a Little Bit Better?
- What Would it Look Like if it Were a Lot Better?
- What Would it Look Like if it Were Perfect?

These distinctions between size of goal, or range of vision, are there for a reason. Some people can only do the 'magic wand' goal creation, the perfect vision – but actually find it very difficult to make everyday meaningful changes. Some people can only do the small everyday changes and need to focus their goal setting on what such changes might achieve. The point is this: calibrate to the needs and style of the client.

More detailed prompts then become helpful to provoke answers to these questions, such as:

- Who would be there? (who wouldn't be there?)
- Where would you be? (where wouldn't you be?)
- What would you be doing? (what wouldn't you be doing?)
- What would you be thinking and feeling? (what would you think less and feel less of?)

The essential outcome is to enable you to create a real sense of a better future. Egan was also keen to ensure that his clients had chosen the right goals for themselves, within their values, that they could commit to accomplishing *before* even considering strategies, or the 'how to do it' list. To check for this we need to ask ourselves the following type of questions:

- if you achieve this how much will it cost you emotionally or situationally?
- What will be the consequence, not just to you but to other people who surround you or people that are involved in the change of circumstance?
- What are the pay offs and incentives for you to actually achieve this goal?
- When you look at this goal will it be something that you will feel really good about?
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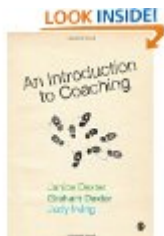
And, a question we came across quite recently from a different contributor:

How much energy will you need to pursue this goal?

These questions are excellent ways of finding that we have chosen the right goal and that there is commitment towards it. These questions challenge ourselves to think very carefully about what we are really saying, what we really want. They help us to understand what our future picture would really look like, how easy it is going to be to achieve.

Remember, goals set at the right level are likely to be achieved more easily than goals that are too easy or too difficult. Be persistent in fleshing out your future, and use your imagination in order to be as creative as possible.

Once a goal is clear, resources will begin to spring to mind, and you can begin to look in more detail about the plan that you might need to make. At this stage, you can begin to draw the broad picture and to deal with the obstacles in your way.



Adapted from [An Introduction to Coaching](#), Dexter, J., Dexter G. and Irving, J. (2011, Sage).