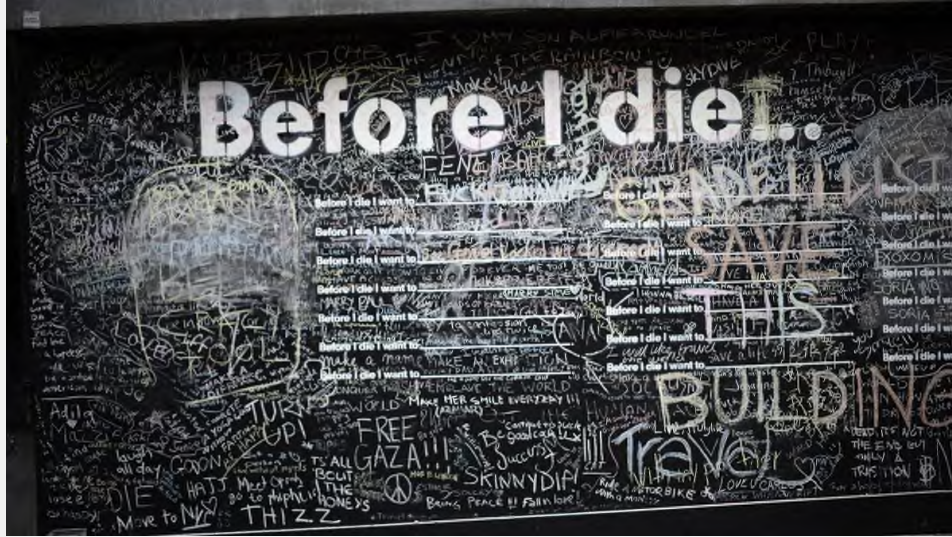


The complete guide to setting goals

By Vickie Elmer December 21, 2013



Step 1: Put it in writing. *Reuters/Dylan Martinez*

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Welcome to the season of setting goals—a two-month period when businesses, families, and individuals explore aspirations for the year ahead.

Stephen Covey's perennial classic, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* offers the following wisdom on goals: Be proactive and begin with the end in mind. You're more likely to attain your goals if you frame them in the right way and [feel a strong commitment](#) (pdf) to your objective.

Here's our guide to choosing the right goals—and accomplishing them:

1. Think big picture

Start by reading your company's corporate strategy, suggests Annie Stevens, an executive coach and co-owner of leadership development firm ClearRock. She notes that there is "an important marriage between strategy and goal setting." Instead of being wedded to the strategy, use it as a way to generate ideas and creative ambitions.

Executive coach Joel Garfinkle starts by asking himself some questions: “What is most important for this year?” “Where do I want to put my energy and attention?” He decides where to focus based on the financials of his business as well as his client’s satisfaction. He also considers, “What do I need to not be doing?”

Garfinkle's high-level review points out areas of focus that leads to specific goals. Some of his clients need to spend less time on email while others should get rid of unproductive people from their team.

2. Make goals SMART or HARD

Most managers want goals that have a measurable impact and are tied to corporate strategy. Here are two ways to achieve that:

SMART stands for “specific,” “measurable,” “achievable,” “relevant,” and “time-bound.” This acronym is borne out of the “management by objectives” philosophy popularized by management consultant Peter Drucker in the 1950s. In *Attitude is Everything*, Paul J. Meyer [writes that the most effective](#)

[goals](#) (pdf) answer the six “W” questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? and Which?, referring to requirements or constraints.

HARD is an acronym devised by Mark Murphy for his 2010 book *HARD Goals*, means “heartfelt,” “animated,” “required,” and “difficult.” Animated refers to being “motivated by a vision, picture or movie that plays over and over in your mind.” Researchers have found that setting a specific, difficult goal consistently leads to higher performance than a general “Do your best.”

Both acronyms also carry the idea that your goals are clearly defined and connected to you.

3. Cultivate everyone’s goals

Most companies have several rungs of goal-setting: corporate goals, executive goals, senior management or department goals—and then there’s everyone else’s goals for the year.

Sometimes employees’ goals are an afterthought, made to simply align with corporate mandates. This is a mistake since helping workers achieve success turns them into powerful allies. What’s more, [happy workers are more productive](#) and engaged.

“We need to treat our employees and their goals like we’d treat the CEO’s goals,” said Murphy, who is founder and CEO of Leadership IQ, a management training company. “If we could have them (executives) treat their employees’ goals with the same respect they treat their own, we’d be blowing the doors off with what we could attain.”

This requires conversations and thoughtful consideration—more than simply checking a box.

Managers should demonstrate interest in their employees’ careers, and coach them so they increase their influence and achieve what they want, not just what the company wants, said David Miles, president of OI Partners – The Miles LeHane Companies. This will help retain talent, as well as motivate employees to achieve more.

4. Don’t underestimate yourself

Most business goals have numbers attached: a 25% increase in customers, hiring 30% more women, reducing shipping time to 12 hours or increasing individual productivity by 50%. Carefully consider these numbers—aim too low and you come off looking like you can’t meet expectations, said Stevens. A better approach: “Surprise on the upside. Gain a reputation as someone who consistently delivers more than is expected” and who stretches and aims high.

People often shy away from higher numbers. Stevens sees it in her own business: Almost every year, leadership coaches set goals for how much revenue they will bring in and every year she asks them to push for more. So they go from a goal of \$600,000 to say \$800,000, and they always make it, Stevens said.

“A lot of people underestimate how much they can get done in a long period of time,” said career coach Caroline Ceniza-Levine. Just make sure you create sub-goals or check-ins every month or once a quarter so that you’re able to make adjustments along the way.

5. Identify barriers to achievement

[Some 60% of people](#) (pdf) cannot pinpoint what’s holding them back from achieving their goals. Sometimes even a heartfelt goal will be difficult to achieve because your assumptions or behavior that

stalls your progress. [Two Harvard Graduate School of Education](#) professors found that when we fail to achieve a goal, it's often a self-defense mechanism.

It's important to identify who or what is likely to hold you back. Fear, disappointment, and distrust can prevent us from taking risks or making changes. [And, fantasy, procrastination](#), and stress causes us to abandon a goal before ever getting started.

6. Reaffirm and reinforce goals

Publicly sharing a goal can increase your commitment to achieving it and make you more accountable. "You have to write them down, on a website, tool, or app or a piece of paper," said Garfinkle. Make your goals visible—post them on a bulletin board or share them with friends or a coworker to build a support system.

This is especially important given that most people lose momentum within a month or two. "Goal setting isn't a one-shot deal," said Murphy, the author of *HARD Goals*. "It needs to be a continual process, testing our goals every couple of weeks." Sometimes workers need help refocusing or re-energizing themselves. Or occasionally the landscape changes and goals need to be redrawn or replaced, Murphy said.

Celebrate your successes and your team's achievements in the form of praise and public recognition. Gifts and monetary rewards are good motivators too. "Acknowledge superior results" with financial incentives or intangible ones, writes author and sales coach Brian Tracy. He favors one-time bonuses for achieving specific projects. Other research shows that group rewards can be more effective [than individual recognition](#).