



Positively Legal: How Goal Setting Can Help Us Achieve More While Improving Our Health and Happiness

Skills and Professional Development



Human needs, including autonomy, mastery, and purpose, provide energy. We pursue goals to satisfy our needs but identifying which goals will make us happier is complex. [Edward Deci](#) suggested that pursuing intrinsic goals (e.g., relationships, growth, and community) tended to be healthier than pursuing extrinsic goals (e.g., wealth, image, and fame).

Whether we choose [SMART](#) goals, [SMARTER](#) goals, or [ABC](#) goals, goal setting is the process by which we achieve our goals. According to [Edwin Locke](#), “Every person’s life depends on the process of choosing goals to pursue, if you remain passive, you are not going to thrive as a human being.”

How and why goal setting works

Shawn Achor, in his book [Before Happiness](#), described the X-Spot — the point where marathon runners turn the corner at 26.1 miles out of the 26.2 mile race and, contrary to expectation and despite their exhaustion, speed up to get to the finish. Achor stated that our brains are goal-orientated machines. For marathon runners, as they see the finish line (their goal), their brains release endorphins and other powerful accelerants needed to find the energy to cross the line.

Goals and goal setting work because they help us to find the motivation and energy we need to complete a task. They motivate us to persist with tasks over time and they direct our attention.

Goal setting is effective and often critical to our success because our goals direct our attention and help us stay away from irrelevant tasks that do not align with our goals or needs. In addition, goals help us find the motivation to stay with a task over time and the energy to finish it.

Finding the right goal setting strategy is key.

Goal setting strategies

Locke and Latham's principles

Dr. Edward Locke and Dr. Gary Latham identified [five key principles](#) for successful goal setting:

1. **Commitment** – We are more likely to stick with and achieve a goal when we are committed to it.
2. **Clarity** – Setting precise, clear goals that can be measured helps us to understand the task.
3. **Challenging** – Setting challenging but attainable goals leads to self-satisfaction, which makes us more likely to achieve the goal.
4. **Task complexity** – Tasks should not be overly complex and should have realistic timeframes.
5. **Feedback** – Goal setting is more effective with immediate feedback (including internal feedback).

Locke and Latham originally believed that publicly sharing our goals increased motivation. However, [studies](#) have shown that talking about a goal significantly lessens your chances of achieving it.

Steven Kotler's The Art of Impossible

[Steven Kotler](#) also advocates keeping goals to yourself. Telling someone our goal gives us the feeling (through our brain releasing dopamine) that the goal has already been achieved. Kotler's book, the [Art of Impossible](#) suggested three tiers when goal setting:

1. **Identify a “massively transformative purpose.”** This is our mission for life, something we are passionate about.
2. **Set “high, hard goals.”** These are specific and measurable (set between one and three years).
3. **Set clear daily goals.** These are based on working towards our high hard goals, including as much clarity as possible to avoid engaging “high level prefrontal cortex dominant activities” and allowing ourselves to more easily [“slip into flow.”](#)

Finally, Kotler suggested writing our to-do list for the next day at the end of the previous one and setting limited tasks for the day. Kotler identified that the need to endlessly repeat the process of daily goals requires the persistence and resilience known as grit.

Shawn Achor's strategy to change the way our brains perceive a goal

Achor described the brain as a goal-oriented machine. When you assign a project deadline or identify any personal or professional goal, your brain assesses how far away the goal is (proximity), how likely you are to achieve it (the size of the target), and the effort we need to achieve it (thrust). He stated that our brains are constantly recalculating these three variables. These variables are not objective, rather, they are based on our perception, which is something we can change. He suggested changing our perception of these variables helps achieve our goals.

1. **Increase proximity** – The closer we get to a target, the harder and faster we work. “Changing your brain's perception of the distance to a target, e.g., the completion of a project, provides drive, focus and motivation, and gets your brain working at maximum capacity.”

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2. **Magnify the target size** – Studies have shown that people are more likely to reach a goal if they think they are likely to hit the target. When we are struggling to finish a complex project, we should remind ourselves of successful past projects so our brains will feel success is more likely.
 3. **Recalculate thrust** – Goals require different levels of energy (or mental cost). The brain uses glucose as energy, and the more [mentally fatigued](#) we are, the more difficult we will find certain tasks. Research has shown that changing our perception and thinking the mental cost will be lower helps people speed towards success by as much as 35 percent. Achor suggested ways to avoid mental fatigue (which reduces your brain's perception of thrust), like not having lunch with a difficult colleague before an important deadline or not reading a dense article before attending a networking event. He also suggests building a routine, like having the same breakfast and lunch each day, and never scheduling two important meetings or mentally draining tasks back-to-back.

It is the journey and not the end goal

Regardless of which strategies we follow, or the outcome of the goal, the journey we embark on can broaden our skills and allow us to grow and learn.

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Caterina Cavallaro is managing legal counsel at VGW.

She combines technical legal skills with practical business understanding and a love of innovation, project management, and legal technology to improve ways of working within the legal industry. She is a member of the ACC's In-House In-Health and Legal Technology and Innovation Special Interest

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In addition to her legal skills she has a Diploma of Positive Psychology and Wellness and is a freelance writer. Her “Positively Legal” column for the *ACC Docket* focuses on the intersection of neuroscience, positive psychology, and in-house practice by interviewing experts and fellow lawyers and curating up to date quality research, podcasts and books to help lawyers learn to take control of their own wellness and support their careers.

Outside of work, Cavallaro loves traveling, snorkeling, meditating and spending time in nature.