

Elements of Effective Goal Setting: The STEP UP Model

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When setting goals, it is critical to ensure that the goals being set are effective. Many people have goals that are general, ambiguous, impossible to measure, or lacking a timeline. I frequently ask participants in workshops what their goals are at the beginning of a session. The responses usually vary from "I'd like to make a lot of money" to "I want to be healthy" to "I'd like to be successful". While I can sympathize with all of these dreams, they are completely ineffective as goals. The vague nature of these statements means that chasing after them is a nearly impossible task. These goals lack specificity, their progress cannot be effectively measured, they are not engaging and they have no timeline. Without these key elements, a goal is usually nothing more than a wish that will never be followed up on.

In order to make goals effective, the STEP UP goal outline was created. There have been many frameworks for goal setting established through the years. Trainers and coaches have played with many acronyms that outline critical elements of effective goals; for the purposes of this article, I created the STEP UP model, a model that I feel encompasses all of the key points that need to be considered when creating goals for yourself. STEP UP consists of: Specific, Time-Bound, Engaging, Practical, Under your Control, Progress Measurement.

Specific

Goals must be specific in order to be effective. For example, "I want to make \$30 000 in sales by December 31, 2004," is a specific goal. "I want to have a good sales year," is not. I often find that people are not nearly specific enough when they set goals for themselves. The more specific the goal, the easier it is to visualize what you want and it will be markedly easier to create a plan of action. A specific goal will also create a sharp focus and it will make the goal real. This is a critical point, as the more real a goal is, the more likely you will be to follow through on it and the following through is really what this whole process all about.

Time-bound

Attaching a timeline to your goals is absolutely critical. So many of us have said things like, "one day I will start my own business." The problem with "one day" is that it gives us an out, an excuse to put things off for another day, week, month, or year. There is no impetus to get things done, no pressure or accountability to make things happen. As a result we tend to put things off.

By setting a deadline, there is a positive pressure to get things done and start taking action immediately. For example, if you know that you need to have a business plan written by January 15th, and this is December 10th, the odds are pretty good that you will push yourself to make things happen immediately. A timeline provides an added incentive, a focal point and a motivating factor that will aid you in your pursuit of success. Push yourself, choose a specific, realistic, and achievable date that will challenge you to take action now. A time-bound goal will make it easy to identify what should be done and when.

Engaging

Choosing a goal that is engaging to you is an important part of the process; indeed, the more engaging the goal, the more likely you are to stick with it and see it through. An engaging challenge, one that you really

care about, will provide added motivation to not only take care of the basics, but will you push you through the really tough times.

Putting in the time and effort to complete the goal setting process is something that requires energy, enthusiasm, discipline, and patience. Reality dictates that if you set goals for yourself that are not engaging - meaning that if you don't really care about the goal you are trying to achieve - your odds of success will be slim. People often set goals for themselves that are not engaging due to a number of factors. Perhaps their job dictates that they achieve a certain amount of sales per week but they hate to sell. In other situations people chase goals suggested by someone else. Many people fail in the pursuit of their goals because they simply don't care enough about the goal to make the sacrifices required. Choose goals that are engaging and motivating; not only will your odds of success increase dramatically, it will make the journey a more positive experience.

Practical

The goal that you are setting for yourself must be practical. It definitely should be challenging, but it should also be practical. When we set goals for ourselves that are so far out of the realm of possibility for us to achieve, we have a small voice in the back our minds that says, "Pack it in, you'll never make it," as the outcome is impossible to achieve anyway. I have accepted the fact that I will never be an Olympic champion on the balance beam - I'm not female, Romanian, nor do I have six hours a day to train for it. This goal is simply not achievable for me, and I would therefore be ill advised to pursue it.

Set goals that are achievable and the odds of your actually achieving them will be in your favour. Challenge yourself, but make sure the achievement of your goals is within the realm of possibility.

Working hand in hand with practicality is reality. When evaluating your goals it is also important evaluate whether or not the goal is a realistic one. A goal may be specific, time-bound, under your control and engaging, but it may not be realistic for you to go after it. If it is required that you work for forty hours a week to achieve your goal, do you have the time? Possibly. But is it practical or realistic? For some people, it may be. For others, if you work forty hours a week, serve on various boards, volunteer in your community, and have three kids, there just simply may not be enough hours in the day to work, take care of commitments at home and chase your goal for an additional forty hours a week. Goals need to be achievable, but they also need to be realistic and practical, not only in terms of what you are capable of, but also in terms of what is most likely to happen based on your schedule, family commitments, and other factors.

Take a good look at what you need to do and be honest with yourself as to whether or not your training plan is practical and realistic. If you truly believe that you just don't have the time or that it is just not realistic for you to work through it, then go back to the drawing board. If you can find time in your schedule and can realistically take an honest step towards completing your goal, then go for it, with no holds barred. The key is honesty. Make your goals practical but avoid talking yourself out of success.

Under Your Control

There are many things in life that we cannot control. The weather, acts of nature, and the actions or performance levels of others are things that we have little or no influence on. Competing against those factors that we cannot control can lead to failure - even if your performance and execution are perfect. Therefore, setting goals that rely on events occurring outside of your influence can be a futile experience.

A common example of this is one often expressed by athletes who frequently say things like, "I want to beat Jim in my next race," or "I won't be happy until I can out-skate Rachael." While these goals are specific and they can be tweaked to meet all of the other STEP UP criteria for goal setting, they are ineffective in that they are not within the athlete's power to control. A competitive athlete can maximize their own performance through hard work, good planning, proper training, and a positive mental outlook; but they can still be beaten. The athlete who wants to "beat Jim" in his next race cannot control how Jim trains, how Jim performs, or anything else pertaining to Jim. Race tactics, confidence and psychological intimidation can affect the performance of an opponent, but all things being equal, we cannot control the performance of an opponent.

As such, we ought to avoid setting goals that rely upon this control.

This concept holds true for all walks of life. If your goal is to be the top sales person in your office, you will be less effective if you focus on what Larry is doing as opposed to what you should be doing. Control those things that you can control, set a goal for your own sales figures, adjust when necessary, and take the top spot through maximizing your own performance. If you don't win, set your sights higher next time. So many people reach their sales goals, perform extremely well, and feel like a failure because they didn't finish on top. Do not allow someone else's performance to minimize what you have managed to accomplish! Instead of saying, "I want to beat everyone else," try "I will maximize my performance by achieving \$10 000 in sales this quarter." If \$10 000 is good enough to win the top sales spot, great. If not, and you do manage to make your sales goal, pat yourself on the back, do your research, and set your sights higher next time.

Control everything that you can control, avoid worrying about those things outside of your influence, and look forward to a more positive experience in going after your goals.

Progress Measurement

When setting out what you would like to achieve, it has to be something that can be measured. The goal mentioned in a previous example, "I want to be healthy," is something that cannot be measured. As "healthy" is relative, how can you know if you've achieved this goal? Are you successful after losing ten pounds or twenty? Are you healthy after you can walk to the corner, or will you only be healthy after you have completed a marathon? A measurable goal would be, "I would like to lose fifteen pounds." This is a goal that is very simple to measure – when you lose fifteen pounds you've made it! You will know exactly what you are shooting for and you can measure your progress along the way. Measurable goals also tend to be more motivating than vague goals such as "I'd like to be healthy" because they provide something that is more real; we can imagine what losing fifteen pounds might look like or feel like, but it would be much more difficult to visualize something as vague as "healthy".

Progress measurement along the way is key as it helps to create a sharp focus and gives us an indication that what we are doing is productive. This can work as a motivating factor and will continue to push you towards goal completion. If you want to lose fifteen pounds and you recognize that you have lost seven and a half pounds, you know you are halfway there and are likely to keep going.

By using the STEP UP acronym as a guideline, you will be creating goals that are effective and you will be creating goals that have real meaning. The next step, taking action to realize your goals, is where the real test comes in. It is easy to write goals down; taking action to implement your goal setting plan is something else altogether.



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