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Helping People Achieve Their Goals by Marshall Goldsmith and Kelly Goldsmith

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In today's competitive world, top executives increasingly understand that sustaining peak performance requires a commitment to developing leaders throughout the organization. Leaders need to develop other leaders. An important part of this development process includes helping people set--and achieve--meaningful goals for personal change. All too often, however, goals are not set in a way that helps ensure the follow-through needed to turn great plans into successful outcomes.

Our research on goal setting and our experience in coaching have helped us better understand the dynamics of what is required to actually produce positive, long-term change in behavior. We believe that the lessons executive coaches have learned in helping their clients set goals apply to leadership development in a wide variety of settings. Whether you are a professional coach, a leader coaching your direct reports, a mentor advising a younger colleague--or just working on your own development--a better understanding of the dynamics of goal setting and the challenges of goal achievement may help you understand why people often set great goals, yet lose the motivation to achieve them. This understanding can help ensure that the people you are coaching stick with the plan and ultimately reach their desired targets.

In this article, we focus primarily on behavioral goals, such as becoming a better listener or more effective at involving team members in decisions. Much of the published research in the field of goal setting involves health-related goals, such as losing weight. We show how many of the challenges that occur when changing behavior that is related to great health (such as more exercise) are similar to challenges that occur in changing behavior that is related to great leadership (such as more listening)!

Why do goal-setters frequently give up in their quest for



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Marshall Goldsmith has recently been named by the American Management Association as one of the 50 great thinkers and leaders in the field of management over the past 80 years. He has been featured in the Wall Street Journal, the New Yorker, Forbes, and the Economist. He is author or coeditor of 18 books including the best-seller "The Leader of the Future." A modified version of this article appears in "Coaching for Leadership: The Practice of Leadership Coaching from the World's Greatest Coaches," 2nd ed., edited by Marshall Goldsmith and Laurence S. Lyons, which has just been published.

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personal improvement? Most of us understand that New Year's resolutions seldom last through January--much less for the entire year! What goes wrong?

Six primary reasons explain why people give up on goals. Understanding these roadblocks to goal achievement can help you apply a little preventive medicine as you help others set goals--so ultimately they will be more likely to achieve their objectives for change.



Ownership

I WASN'T sure this idea for changing behavior would work in the first place. I tried it out--it didn't seem to do that much good. As I guessed, this was kind of a waste of time.

One of the most common mistakes in all leadership development is the roll-out of programs and initiatives that promise, "This will make you better." A classic example is the performance appraisal process. Many companies change their performance appraisal forms on a regular basis with the promise that the "new and improved" form will lead to more effective feedback. How much good effect do these changes usually have? None! The new appraisal forms usually just confuse leaders and are seen as annual exercises in futility. What companies don't want to face is the real problem with the appraisal process--it is almost never the form. The real problem is the managers who lack either the courage or the discipline required to deliver effective feedback.

The problem with "this will make you better" is that the emphasis is usually on the "this" and not the "you." Leaders who want to help their people develop as leaders need to communicate a clear message--ultimately, only you can make you better.

Successful people tend to have a high need for self-determination. In other words, the more leaders commit to coaching and behavioral change because *they* believe in the value of the process, the more likely the process is to work. The more they feel that the change is being imposed upon them--or that they are just trying it out--the less likely the coaching process is to work.

In goal setting, you need to ensure that the change objectives come from inside the person you are coaching--and are not just externally imposed with no clear internal commitment. As executive coaches, we have learned that our clients need to understand that they are ultimately responsible for their own behavior. Leaders, who are also coaches, need to communicate the same clear message.



Time

I HAD no idea this process would take so long. I am not sure it is worth it.

We all have a natural tendency to underestimate the time needed to reach targets. Everything seems to take longer than we think it should! When the time elapsed in achieving our goals starts exceeding our expectations, we are tempted just to give up on the goal. Busy, impatient professionals can be even more time-sensitive than the general population.

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- [Table of Contents](#)
- [From the Editors](#)
- [Resources](#)
- [Leadership Action Guide](#)

While the "optimism bias" about time is true of goal-setters in general, it can be even more of a factor for leaders who are trying to change while the perceptions of coworkers seem to ignore their new behavior. We all tend to see people in a manner that is consistent with our previous stereotype--and we look for behavior that proves our stereotype is correct. Coworkers are no different from anyone else. Research reported in the Fall 2004 issue of *Strategy+Business* shows that the *long-term* follow-up and involvement of coworkers tends to be highly correlated with positive change in the perceived effectiveness of leaders. This positive change in perception does not occur overnight. Harried executives want to "check the box" and assume that once they understand what to do--and communicate this understanding to others--their problems are solved. If only the real world were that simple!

In helping others set goals, it is important for them to be realistic about the time required to produce a positive, long-term change in behavior. Habits that have taken 40 years to develop will not go away in a week. Help them understand that others' perceptions may seem unfair and that--as they change their behavior--others may not recognize this change for months. If you help them establish realistic expectations in the goal-setting process, people will not feel there is something wrong with them or their coworkers when they face a time challenge. They will realize that this is a normal part of the change process. Ultimately, as the research shows, changed leadership behavior will lead to changed perceptions and more effective relationships with coworkers.



Difficulty

T*HIS is a lot harder than I thought it would be. It sounded so simple when we were starting out.*

The optimism bias of goal-setters applies to difficulty as well as time. Not only do most achievements take longer than expected--they also require more hard work! Managers often confuse two terms that appear to be synonymous but are actually quite different: simple and easy. We want to believe that once we understand a simple concept, it will be easy to execute a plan and achieve results. If this were true, everyone who understood that they should eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly would be in shape. Diet and exercise books are almost always at the top of the best-seller lists. Our challenge for getting in shape--as well as changing leadership behavior--is not *understanding*, it is *doing*!

Long-term change in leadership effectiveness requires real effort. For example, it can be challenging for busy, opinionated leaders to have the discipline to stop, breathe, and listen patiently while others say things they do not want to hear. While leaders may understand the need to change--and even have a great desire to change--it is still hard to have the discipline to change.

It is critical to help goal-setters understand that real change requires real work. Trying to get buy-in with statements like "this will be easy" or "this will be no problem for you" can make goal-setters feel good in the short term, but can backfire in the long term--when they finally realize that change is not that easy and begin to face trade-offs and challenges in their journey toward improvement. Helping goal-setters understand the price for success in the beginning of the change process will help prevent the demoralization that can occur when challenges arise later in the change process.



Distractions

I**WOULD** really like to work toward my goal, but my company is facing a unique challenge right now. It might be better if I just stopped and worked on this goal at a time when

things aren't so crazy!

Goal-setters have a tendency to underestimate the distractions and competing goals that will invariably appear throughout the year. One good counsel you can give to the person you are coaching is, "I am not sure what crisis will emerge in the next year--but I am almost positive that some crisis will emerge!"

In some cases the distraction or crisis may come from a problem; in other cases it may result from an opportunity. For example, mad cow disease was a crisis for leaders in the meat-packing industry. It is hard to focus on long-term leadership development when the company is facing a short-term financial crisis! On the positive side, when "Cabbage Patch Kids" became a craze, the company started selling more dolls than anyone could ever imagine. It is hard to focus on long-term leadership development when your company has a "once in a lifetime" short-term profit opportunity.

In planning for the future, coaches need to help goal-setters assume that unexpected distractions and competing goals will occur. Leaders should expect the unexpected and build in time to deal with it. By planning for distractions and competing goals in advance, leaders will be far less likely to give up on the change process when either special problems or special opportunities appear.



Rewards

W*HY am I working so hard at becoming a more effective leader?
After all my effort--we still aren't making any more money!* The challenge is not *understanding*, it is *doing!*

People tend to become disappointed when the achievement of one goal doesn't immediately translate into the achievement of other goals. For example, dieters who lose weight may give up on their weight loss efforts when prospective dates don't immediately become more attracted to them.

Hewitt Associates has done some fascinating research (summarized in *Leading the Way* by Robert Gandossy and Marc Effron) that documents the positive, long-term relationship between a company's investment in leadership development and its long-term financial success. By contrast, no research shows that investment in developing leaders produces greater short-term profits.

Increasing leadership effectiveness is only one factor in determining an organization's overall success. For example, a company may have the wrong strategy or be selling the wrong product. If a company is going down the wrong road, increasing people management skills will only help it get there faster.

Managers need to personally buy in to the value of a long-term investment in their own development. If they mistakenly believe that improving leadership skills will quickly lead to short-term profits, promotions, or recognition, they may become disappointed and give up when these benefits don't immediately occur. If they see personal change as a long-term investment in their own development--a process that will help them become more effective over the course of their careers--they will be much more likely to pay the short-term price needed for long-term gain.



Maintenance

THINK I did actually get better when I was being coached, but I have let it slide since then. What am I supposed to do, work on this stuff for the rest of my life? When people change, relationships change.

Once a goal-setter has put in all the effort needed to achieve a goal, the reality of the work required to maintain changed behavior can be tough to face. One of the first reactions of many dieters upon reaching their weight reduction goal is to think, "This is great! Now I can start eating again. Let's celebrate with some pizza and beer!" Of course this mind-set leads to future weight gain and the yo-yo effect that is unfortunately so common in dieters.

Leaders need to understand that leadership is a *process*--not a *state*. Leaders can never "get there." Leaders are always "getting there." The only way exercise helps people stay in shape is when they face reality: "I do have to work on this stuff for the rest of my life!" Leaders need to accept that their leadership development is an ongoing process that will never stop. Leadership involves relationships--when people change, relationships change--and maintaining any positive relationship requires ongoing effort over a long period of time. Relationships don't remain great because someone "got better" and stayed in this state of "betterness" forever--with no additional work.



Real Change Requires Real Effort

The quick fix is seldom the meaningful fix.

LEADERS can help people set goals that increase their probability of lasting change--or they can help them set goals that may feel good in the short term but lead to disillusionment and giving up in the long term.

The typical advertisement or "infomercial" designed to help people get in shape provides a great example of what not to do in goal setting. The message is almost always the same: "For an *incredibly small* amount of money, you can buy a *revolutionary* product that is *amazingly easy* and *fun to use*. This product will produce *fantastic results* in *almost no time* and you will have *the body that you always wanted*." Most infomercials imply that you will not have to continue exercising and dieting for years--that you will continue to look young--and that you will be a magnet for members of the opposite sex for the rest of your life!

In reality there is no easy answer. Real change requires real effort. The quick fix is seldom the meaningful fix. Distractions and competing responses are going to happen. The higher the level of the leader, the more likely it is that they will happen. Improving leadership skills--like getting in shape--won't solve all of life's problems. And finally, great leadership is not a game that can be won in a year--it is a process that requires the commitment of a lifetime!

One of our great teachers, Paul Hersey, always said, "Leadership is not a popularity contest." An important component of leadership is coaching. Coaching should never become a popularity contest either. Coaches, whether inside the company or external, need to have the courage to tell the truth up front. By challenging people in the goal-setting process and helping goal-setters face the difficult realities of lasting change, good coaches can go a long way toward ensuring that behavioral change becomes a reality--and that goals don't become more "New Year's resolutions" that feel good for a few days--but then disappear over time. This message may sound tough but at least it is real. Successful people are not afraid of challenging goals--they just need to understand the true commitment that will be required to reach these goals. In fact, clear and specific goals that produce a lot of challenge--when coupled with a realistic assessment of the roadblocks to overcome in achieving these goals--can produce consistently strong long-term results.

The benefits of well-thought-out goal setting are clear. Honest, challenging coaches can

help people make a real difference--both in their organizations and in the lives of the people they help.



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