

Setting effective goals

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What Is goal setting?

Goal setting isn't as simple as deciding 'I want to be more productive'. It is a meaningful and well thought out process that involves you deciding the direction you would like to go in and setting yourself clear targets to get there.

Not only do you have to set yourself a clear goal you would like to achieve, you also need to determine a system that will help you to achieve that goal.

For example, if your goal is to learn how to play the piano, your system may be that you will go to classes once a week, and practice for 30 minutes 4 times a week in between classes.

Why Is goal setting important?



Increases motivation

Goal setting is likely to increase your motivation. Your goal is no longer just a thought, and you have set out what you need to do to meet it. It reminds you what you're working towards, and provides the first steps towards action.

Provides direction

Setting goals gives you a target to work towards, so you can identify what you need to do to meet it, and what would be unhelpful. It helps you to put your energy into actions that actually make a difference.

Provides accountability

If you set yourself a goal, you will have to hold yourself accountable to it. A well thought out goal will provide you with a timeline and targets to complete. This makes it more likely that you will follow through on what you have committed yourself to.

Provides metrics for success

Goal setting will provide you with measurable metrics for success so you can clearly measure whether or not you are on target, and how much further you need to go to meet your goal.

Creates momentum

Setting yourself a clear goal and identifying the process that you need to achieve it will help you to maintain the momentum as you progress. You will be able to look back and see how far you have come, and also how much closer you are to the finish line.

The goal-setting process

To set clear and effective goals, you need to identify what your priorities are, and what you need to do to meet them. Your goals need to be broken down into actionable steps.

Write down overarching goals

First, you need to identify what your large-scale goals are. What exactly is it that you want to achieve?

You don't need to be able to explain it in great depth at this point, but having a general understanding of your ambitions at this point will allow you to break them down further.

Prioritise your goals

Out of all the goals that you have identified, which is the most important to you right now? If you're not sure about this ask yourself which one you would be most committed to. Is it a realistic goal? Why is it important to you?

Break down into smaller tasks

Break your goal down further into smaller, more achievable targets. This way your goal won't be as intimidating, and you will have smaller milestones to work towards.

If you are struggling to think of smaller targets to set for yourself, work backwards from your end goal.

Identify actionable steps

After you have identified your milestones, determine the steps that you need to take to meet each of them.

Review your system regularly

Once you have finalised your plan and started working towards your goal, it would be useful to also schedule in time to regularly review your progress. Unexpected situations may arise that set back your timeline, so it is important to review and make any adjustments if necessary.

Setting SMART goals

SMART goals are more likely to be met as they are clearly laid out. SMART stands for **Specific**, **Measurable**, **Achievable**, **Relevant**, and **Time bound**.

Specific

Is your goal clearly defined? Does it tell you exactly where you want to go? Make sure that when setting your goal, you keep in mind what achievement looks like, and the steps that you need to take for it.

Measurable

Make sure that you have clear metrics by which you can track progress towards your end goal. Have quantifiable targets, either by setting deadlines or having precise numerical goals.

Achievable

Your goal needs to be realistic, otherwise you are likely to end up frustrated and demotivated. It needs to be a goal that you actually have the time, resources, and skills to meet.

Relevant

Is the goal that you have set truly reflective of what you want to be doing with your time? Think about whether the goal is meaningful to you. Is it something that you will be able to remain committed to in the long run?

Time bound

Make sure that you set a deadline or end date for your goal. If you don't, you are more likely to fall into the trap of procrastination under the impression of having unlimited time.

Set yourself both long- and short-term milestones. This will keep the momentum going throughout, whilst also keeping in mind your overall goal.

Measuring your goal progress

Why should you measure progress?

Measuring progress is essential for you to understand how you are doing, and to see if you are on track to meet your goals. It is important to have reliable metrics to track your development with, rather than trying to guess if you are on track to meet your goal.

Understand how you are developing

Having an objective way to view your progress takes emotions out of the equation. When we are stressed and overwhelmed, we might feel like we are making less progress than we actually are.

Identify and adjust for roadblocks

You will be able to easily identify when you are falling behind and quickly assess why. Being able to identify roadblocks as they happen allows you to adjust and make necessary changes to remain on track.

Increase motivation

When you measure your progress, you will be able to see that while each day you work towards your goal may seem small or unimportant, it actually contributes towards the bigger picture. This can serve as a motivation boost and encourage you to keep going.

Increase overall productivity

If you know that you are objectively tracking the progress you're making, you're less likely to procrastinate, increasing your overall productivity.

How to measure your progress

Checklists

A simple way to measure your progress is by creating checklists, and ticking off tasks as you complete them.

You may choose to create a checklist for the whole week or month, and as time goes on, see how you are progressing through the list.

Checklists can also help you identify if you are taking the right approach. For example, if you are ticking everything off your list each day, but your performance at work isn't improving, it's likely that the current approach you're taking isn't working for you.

Paperclip method

The paperclip method is useful when having to complete repetitive tasks.

To implement this strategy, you need two jars – one filled with items such as paperclips or coins, and the other empty. Fill the first jar with the number of times you want to do something each day, e.g. send 25 cold emails per day. Then, each time you send an email, you move a paperclip to the empty jar. By the end of the day, the jar that was initially empty should be full!

Having a visual aid to view your progress can help to further motivate you and see how each action you take gradually contributes to your overall goal.

Seinfeld method

Decide on a metric that you want to track, such as making 10 sales calls per day. Every day that you achieve this target, put an 'X' on your calendar for that date. Over time, you should see the number of 'X's' build up, and you'll be clearly able to see days where you've met this target.

Measure the difference

When you set your goals, you should have a numerical metrics by which you can measure your progress.

For example, if your goal is to learn how to play the piano, you might set yourself a target of practicing for 3 hours per week. With that goal, you can track how many hours you actually practice for each week, and see how close you are to the target you set for yourself.

Why goals get off track

Despite having the best of intentions, our goals sometimes end up getting off track. Forming new habits is difficult and takes time and perseverance. It's important to remain aware of the factors that can lead to us getting off track so we can do something about them.

The environment isn't supportive

If the environment you're in doesn't reflect the goal you want to achieve, you'll find it more difficult to work towards your goals. Being surrounded by constant reminders of our previous choices and behaviours can make it seem like we are fighting an uphill. This can make it harder to remain motivated.

We wait for motivation to drive us

Motivation is fleeting, and you can't wait for it to come before you get started. Instead, you need to repeat your actions, regardless of motivation, to form productive habits.

We don't have faith in our abilities

A big part of being able to work towards your goals is believing in yourself. If you don't believe in yourself, you're more likely to be demotivated, think negatively about yourself and your goals, and talk yourself into believing that you can't do something.

We struggle to get started

Sometimes, the hardest part can simply be getting started. The friction you feel when needing to begin a new task or behaviour can be difficult to overcome. You need to choose between instant gratification, and achieving your long-term goal.

How to stick to your goals

Make sure your environment promotes positive behaviours

You can alter your environment to promote positive habits and behaviours, by providing yourself with visual cues to remind you to do them. For example, you might stick a to-do list to your computer monitor to remind yourself of the most important tasks that you have to complete.

Make commitments and hold yourself accountable

Instead of relying on fleeting bouts of motivation to determine your behaviours, make commitments that hold you to the behaviours and actions you want to be taking.

For example, if you want to prevent yourself from getting distracted by social media, you might download an app that blocks apps for certain periods.

Create habits that are identity-based

Identity-based habits help by reducing negative self-talk that can demotivate you, and promote positive behaviours and a strong sense of self.

- Who do you need to be to achieve the goal that you want?
- Reinforce to yourself that you are that type of person.
- Behave in a way that reinforces that identity, and demonstrates how you can be the type of person you want to be.

Habit stacking

Habit stacking is when you link new habits that you want to form to pre-existing ones.

First, you need to identify what your pre-existing, default habits are. These could be things like making a coffee in the morning, showering, brushing your teeth, getting dressed, checking text messages etc.

Then you need to think about the new behaviours that you want to incorporate into your daily life, and stack these on top of your existing habits. This way, you're linking something new with something that you find easy to do.