



26 Aug 2011

Achieving your goals

1. A key step in achieving your goals is to write them down. It's not difficult, but in a recent UGM study we found that only 38% of people had a clear written pathway and plan for 1 year career goals. Perhaps it's not surprising that only 56% felt they would achieve their 1 year career goals.

2. Share your written goals with supportive others. This step is a powerful personal influencer that significantly increases your chances of reaching the outcomes you are seeking. If you're not that bothered, why set the goals in the first place? But, don't be surprised when you're not making the kind of progress that would make you happy.

3. Make yourself accountable to others for your goals by reporting regularly. Timelines will obviously depend on the time horizon of the goals you are pursuing.

Even if they're long-term goals, you'll probably want to check in every two months. There is excellent research on long-term projects showing that bi-monthly review cycles have lower failure rates than reviews conducted less frequently.

DO WRITTEN GOALS REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Urban myth

Goals matter to Gail Matthews, a psychology professor at California's Dominican University. For more than 3 decades her research focus has been on the psychology of career choice and career development. Goals obviously play a big part in that.

Naturally, the Yale Business School study on the power of written goals was of interest. In that study, only 3% of the graduating class had specific, written goals for their future. Tracked 20 years later, those 3% with clear goals were earning 10 times what the other 97% who had no written goals were earning. Powerful!

Findings so powerful, that the results are regularly cited. In fact, it's likely that you've also heard of a similar study at the Harvard Business School, between 1979 and 1989. Interestingly, the study found the same results. A search of GoogleBooks reveals these studies are cited in numerous recent titles, by some well-known authors.

Digging a little deeper though, Prof Matthews discovered that these studies were never conducted. No evidence for them at all, after an extensive review of the literature. Other investigations have reached the same conclusion. These famous 'studies' are just an urban myth. No more than a modern day 'fairy story'.

Pursuing the truth about written goals

Why is it that the myth could be perpetuated for so long? A key reason is due to what researchers call 'face validity'. On face value it seemed plausible. Since goals appeared to have such a pivotal impact on careers, Gail Matthews decided to conduct the study that never was. Admittedly, she was interested in the impact of written goals, commitment to outcomes and goal accountability.

The study was a lot more modest than the Class of '53 or '79 with a ten or twenty year horizon. It involved 267 participants, from a wide variety of organisations and professional backgrounds. They were at different levels within their organisations and between 23 and 72 years of age. They came from six diverse countries (including US, India and Japan).

A real study of written goals

The study looked at goals and outcomes relating to a one month period. Participants were divided randomly into five different groups. Goals differed widely. For example, selling a house, securing a contract, completing a strategic plan, and preventing a hostile take-over. Real people, real goals!

Group 1 simply thought about their goals. They also rated the goals on a number of dimensions: difficulty; importance; skills and resources available;

commitment and motivation to goals; and whether the goals had been attempted before and if so, prior success.

Group 2 typed their goals into an online survey and then rated the goals on the five dimensions. Group 3 did the same as Group 2 and provided action commitments. Group 4 did the same and then sent these to a supportive friend. The fifth group also sent weekly progress updates to their supportive friend.

Having written goals makes a huge difference

Those with written goals (Group 2-5) achieved more than those whose goals were not written (Group 1). Group 1 scored 4.28 on mean goal achievement and Group 2-5 scored 6.44. This result is statistically significant and the substance of the urban legend (and face validity) is confirmed. Having written goals increases the likelihood of achieving them.

Matthews also found statistically significant support for her additional ideas. Group 5, who had written goals and were sharing weekly updates, achieved the highest average goal achievement score – 7.6. This was significantly higher than the 6.41 that Group 4 scored (share initially with someone supportive). This, in turn, was notably higher than Group 3, who had written goal actions but had not shared their goals. Group 3 scored 5.08.

In an interesting turn, Group 2, who had written goals only, with no actions, scored 6.08. So, Group 2 had scored higher than Group 3. However, they had scored much higher than Group 1 (no written goals), whose average score was only 4.28. Group 2 also scored significantly lower than Group 5's 7.6.

Conclusions from the Dominican study

The first key insight is that accountability has a positive effect on goal outcomes. Those who sent weekly progress updates achieved significantly higher outcomes than those who didn't. Thinking about the pillars of influence for a moment, you'll recognise the impact here of 'reciprocity'. If someone is willing to receive your weekly updates and support you, then you need to reciprocate by carrying through - make and show progress.

The second insight is that just making a public commitment makes a difference. Simply sharing the goals, even once, activates another of the powerful pillars of influence – consistency. Once you've publicised something, you're more likely to follow through with it to be consistent with your statement.

Finally, if you only do one thing in relation to your goals, write them down. Those in the study who did, accomplished significantly more than those who didn't. You can confidently use and cite this research, knowing that it's based on evidence rather than an urban myth.