

GOAL-SETTING

“If you don’t know where you’re going, you’ll probably end up someplace else”
– Yogi Berra

At the end of each day, some of us find that although we feel we have spent the entire day busy and running, we have not really accomplished much. Then there is always someone – a sibling, roommate or classmate – that is accomplishing something great every time we turn around. Why is that?

Most likely, your answer is related to goal-setting. You may work hard and keep busy, but if you do not set goals you are apt to find yourself working hard without any meaningful results. Think about the story of Alice in Wonderland: at one point Alice asks which road she should take. The Cheshire Cat asks where she would like to go, to which Alice replies, “I don’t much care where.” The Cat’s response? “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go.” Alice ends up wandering aimlessly as a result.

Without goals, we are like Alice – wandering aimlessly throughout life. Setting goals gives us direction, purpose and focus in our lives. How you go about setting your goals can be the critical factor determining whether or not you achieve them. For increased success, consider these points when establishing your goals:

- Be specific. How often we hear a New Year’s resolution like “I’m going to lose weight this year.” While this is a start in goal-setting, an effective goal needs to be specific. An alternative way to state this goal: “I’m going to lose one pound a week by beginning a personal fitness program at IMPE, drinking eight glasses of water a day, walking one mile three mornings a week, etc.”
- Write it down. This is not to say that you will forget your goal if you do not. Writing it down, along with your specific action plan, will make your goal more concrete. It will also serve as a reminder when you are tempted to do something unrelated or detrimental to your goals.
- Difficult – but achievable. When setting your goals be realistic, but challenge yourself at the same time. If you presently read a book a week for fun and want to increase that amount, do not jump into a goal like “I am going to read a book a day.” This is a drastic step, and if you do not reach your goal, you are likely to become discouraged and frustrated. On the other hand, “I am going to read a book and one page each week” may not be challenging enough. Challenge your abilities without discouraging your effort.
- Set (realistic) deadlines. As Brian Taylor stated, “Goals are dreams with deadlines.” As part of your action plan, set a deadline for each goal. Again, challenge yourself, but be

realistic.

- Visualize it. So much of our energy towards reaching our goals comes from a yearning to attain them. If your goal consists of running a 5k in six months, picture yourself crossing the finish line with your family and friends applauding you.
- Compartmentalize. You know the phrase “dream big?” Dream big and you can achieve great things – but great things are accomplished one step at a time. Do not be afraid to set high goals for yourself, but break them into manageable pieces.
- Progress checks. Review your goals and progress at regular intervals. Make sure the goals are still realistic and relevant. Alter those that are no longer relevant or that you have already achieved. For example, if one of your goals is to get an “A” in statistics but the course is now over, it is time to adjust your goal. This step will also help motivate you by highlighting your accomplishments.

Now that you have established your goals, contemplate the strategies that will help you achieve them:

- Accept responsibility. Realize that you and only you are responsible for achieving your goals. Do not blame others; instead, focus on solving problems and working effectively.
- Ask for help. Accepting responsibility does not mean working alone. Who has the skills or gifts that can help you reach your goals?
- Recognize necessary resources. Consider what you need to accomplish your goals: Money? Additional education? A particular person’s help? Determine how you will obtain these resources.
- Reward yourself. If you successfully accomplish a goal or a step towards your goal, congratulate yourself (But do it in a way consistent with your goals)!

If you have a setback or fall off the track of your goal, do not deem yourself a failure and give up. We are human – we are allowed to make mistakes! Acknowledge your setback and learn from it. Then move on to successfully complete your goals.

Reference: Wilson, S.B. (1994). Goal Setting. NY: AMACOM.

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