GOALS GUIDE

Best Practices in Setting and Pursuing Goals

by Gregg Vanourek

gregg vanourek
GOOD LIFE • GOOD WORK

Contents

Chapter 1

The Benefits of Setting and Pursuing Goals

Goals are the desired results we hope to achieve. They're the object of our ambition and effort.

There are many different types of goals, including the following:

personal goals	professional goals
process goals	outcome goals
approach goals* (seeking desirable outcomes)	avoidance goals (seeking to avoid undesirable outcomes)
activity goals* (striving for a new activity such as learning to surf)	circumstance goals (striving to improve our circumstances)
committed goals (goals we're committed to achieving)	aspirational (or "stretch") goals (very ambitious and challenging goals that we hope to achieve, perhaps 60-70% probability)

* NB: approach goals and activity goals tend to induce more lasting happiness, according to the research.

We can also have goals in different areas, such as career, health, finances, and education.

The Benefits of Setting and Pursuing Goals
When done well, setting and pursuing goals can help motivate individuals, workers, athletes, teams, and organizations to achieve at higher levels.

Goal-setting works by marshaling motivation and energy to work to achieve our aims. Without goals, we often fail to put in the effort needed to achieve at high levels. There are many potential benefits of goal-setting and goal-pursuit when done well.

Goal-setting can boost our motivation and our sense of purpose, direction, and control. It can help us link our daily behavior with the bigger picture of our important aspirations and dreams—giving us something to strive toward and look forward to.

Goal-pursuit tends to bring structure and a sense of meaning (and, ideally, progress) to our days, while also giving us opportunities to take on new responsibilities, master new skills, and collaborate with others. It challenges us to get organized, use our time effectively, strategize, evaluate, and overcome obstacles.

According to researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky in her book, *The How of Happiness*, one of the characteristics of the happiest people is that they tend to be deeply committed to lifelong goals and ambitions. Having goals is strongly associated not only with happiness but also with overall life satisfaction. She notes that people who strive for something that's personally significant to them are far happier than those who don't have compelling dreams or aspirations.

What's more, we experience a boost in confidence when we set challenging goals and achieve them. Setting and pursuing goals can boost our energy and lead to greater work engagement, satisfaction, and enjoyment as well as higher productivity and performance. Researchers have established a strong connection between goal-setting and the probability of success.

There are also many benefits of goal-setting and goal-pursuit for teams and organizations. For example, goals can focus us on what matters most, help us find ways to measure progress toward those things, foster alignment, and motivate us to stretch beyond our normal bounds and into the territory of higher performance.

"Goals are the fuel in the furnace of achievement."
-Brian Tracy
Canadian-American author and speaker

Chapter 1 Postscript:
Inspirations on the Benefits of Goals

"If you want to be happy, set a goal that commands your thoughts, liberates your energy, and inspires your hopes." -**Andrew Carnegie, Scottish-American industrialist and philanthropist**

"Goals allow you to control the direction of change in your favor." -**Brian Tracy, Canadian-American author and speaker**

"An aim in life is the only fortune worth finding." -**Robert Louis Stevenson, Scottish novelist**
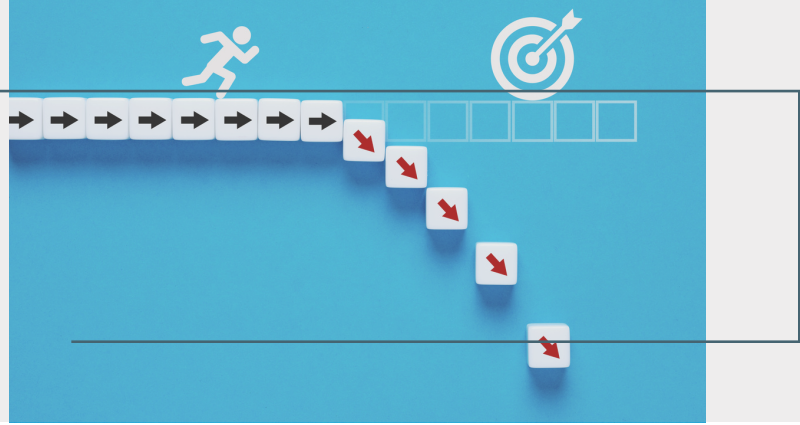
"It is the goals that we pursue that will shape and determine the kind of self that we are to become.... Without a consistent set of goals, it is difficult to develop a coherent self." -**Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Hungarian-American psychologist and author**

"What keeps me going is goals." -Muhammad Ali champion boxer
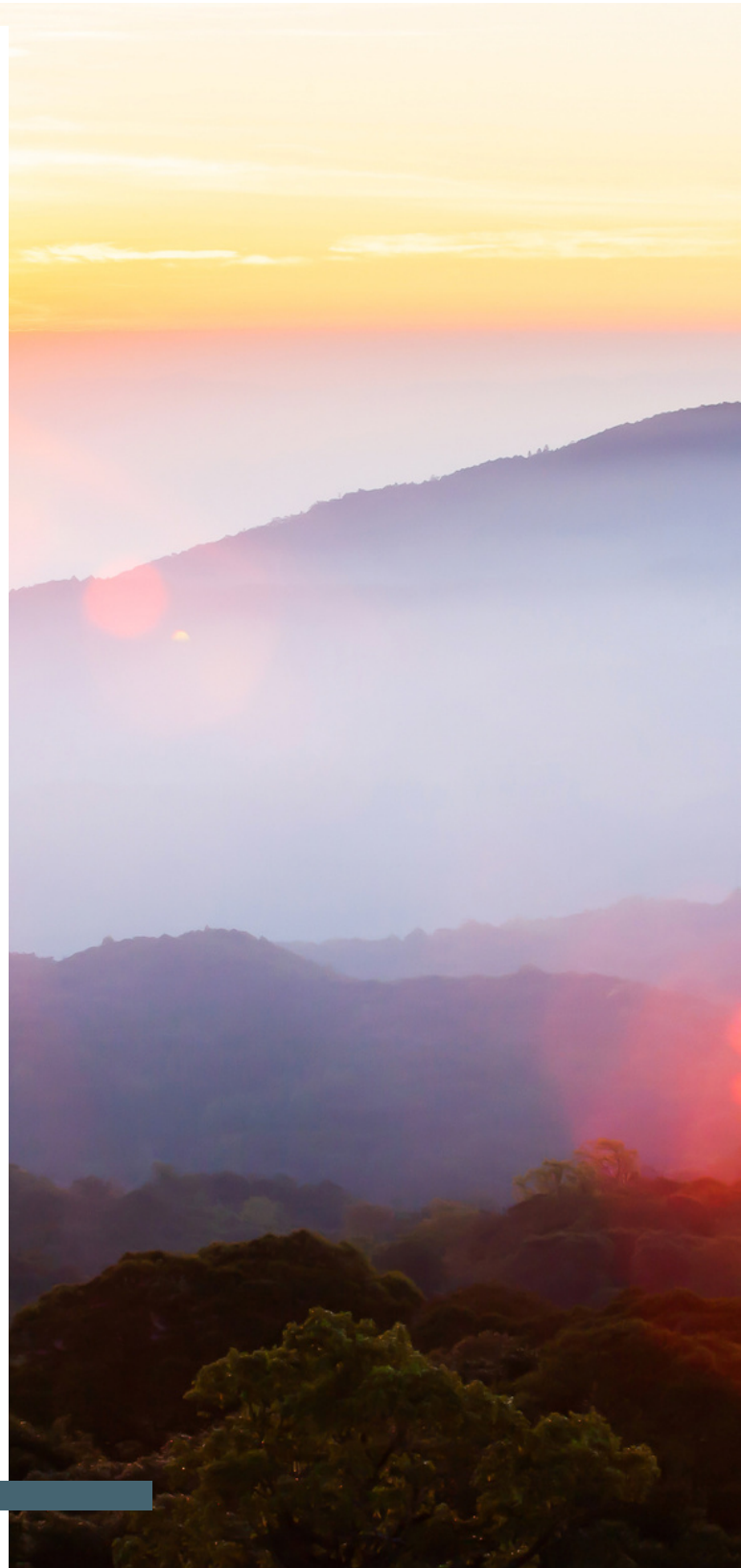
Chapter 2

The Most Common Mistakes in Goal-Setting and Goal-Pursuit

Though researchers have examined goals and goal-setting for more than a century, the practice of setting and pursuing goals is still widely misunderstood and often badly misapplied.

There are dangers of not getting it right. When we don't set and pursue goals properly, we can experience frustration, stress, burnout, and disillusionment.[1] In this chapter, we'll first address the most common mistakes in goal-setting and then turn to the most common mistakes in goal-pursuit.

I. The 8 Most Common Mistakes in Goal-Setting

There's no shortage of advice and opinions on setting goals. Unfortunately, much of the advice gets some things wrong or falls short on at least a few key factors.

Given how little training we're given in goal-setting (if any), perhaps it should be unsurprising that there are many things we're missing. Here are eight common mistakes:

1. Not identifying and focusing on the most important goal.

2. Getting overwhelmed with too many goals.
When we have too many goals, it risks diluting our efforts.

3. Adopting other people's goals.

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[1] There are even some situations in which goal-setting can work against us. For example, researchers have discovered that in tasks that require complex thinking (e.g., when we're solving problems, engaging in creative work, or learning), goal-setting can sometimes backfire. One main reason is that the goal itself can take up so much space in our attention and working memory that we have less cognitive firepower left to generate new ideas and think through new solutions. Essentially, the goal can become a distraction.

We're social creatures prone to extensive influence from others, but taking on the goals we think we should have or ones that others will admire can take us away from our own aspirations and aims. This mistake often results from the trap of caring too much about what others think.

> "...to let another man define your own goals is to give up one of the most meaningful aspects of life—the definitive act of will which makes a man an individual."
> **-Hunter S. Thompson, letter to his friend Hume Logan**

4. Setting goals out of ego.
We may set goals from a place of wanting or needing to attain status or prestige from others if we achieve certain things they value. (This can lead us down the trap of excessive materialism, which can be a drain on our ultimate happiness because of "hedonic adaptation"—our tendency to return quickly to our baseline level of happiness even after experiencing major changes or events.)

5. Setting goals only in one area.
Many people leap right into goals about a promotion or target weight but overlook the importance of setting goals for their relationships, education, or community. Why not set goals in a few different key areas (perhaps choosing from these categories: quality of life, health, relationships, education, work, service, or finances), while also being careful not to have too many goals? Researchers have found that relationship goals tend to bring greater wellbeing than achievement goals.

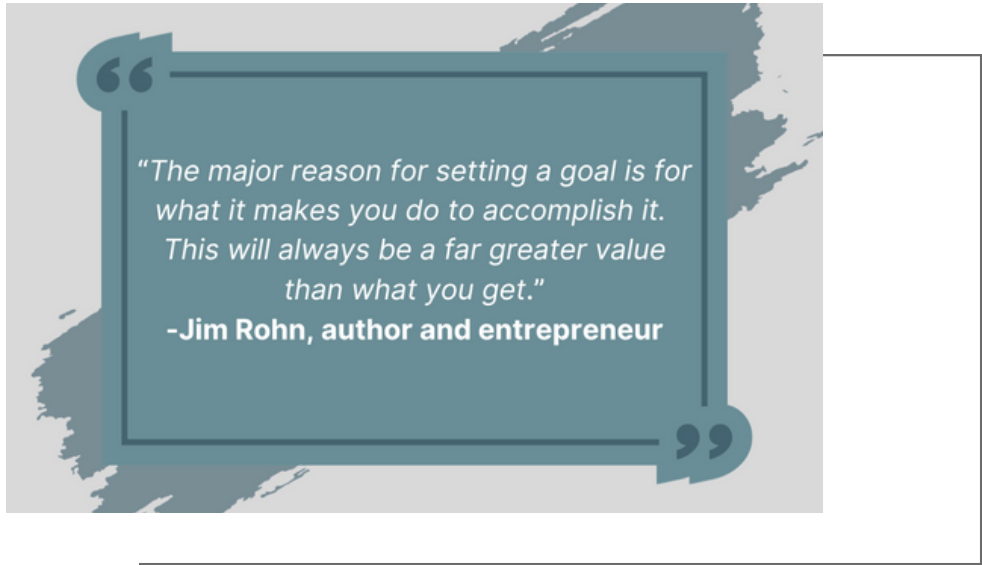**6. Assuming that achieving our goals will make us happy.**
Naturally, many positive emotions tend to accompany goal attainment, from satisfaction or relief to excitement or elation. But the effect is often more short-lived than we imagine. Most goal attainment only changes things temporarily, and we humans have a tendency to adapt quickly to the new normal (again, "hedonic adaptation"). There's more to life than achieving goals.

It's often the pursuit of the goal that really engages our motivation. (Writer Chris Guillebeau calls it the "happiness of pursuit.") Many people struggle with the doldrums or low motivation after achieving a big goal because their animating focus has suddenly disappeared. Also, lasting happiness is much more about close personal relationships, purpose, and contribution than it is about goal attainment or material status.

7. Thinking too much about the end result we're after and not enough about whether we're willing to endure the pain and sacrifice to achieve our goals.
Dreaming of marvelous scenarios of goal attainment is the easy part, but only a small fraction of the process. The real question is what we're willing to do and give up to make our goals a reality.

> "The major reason for setting a goal is for what it makes you do to accomplish it. This will always be a far greater value than what you get."
> -Jim Rohn, author and entrepreneur

8. Focusing too much on the goal and not enough on developing the habits, systems, and practices needed to achieve the goal and measure our progress along the way.
We can dream or visualize all we want, but in the end we need to roll up our sleeves and get cracking with the sometimes boring but always important grind of goal-pursuit.

II. The 6 Most Common Mistakes in Goal-Pursuit

What do many people get wrong when it comes to pursuing their goals? A lot. Here are six common mistakes:

1. Lowering goals if we fail to achieve them.
It may be tempting to lower the bar after hitting the first hurdle, instead of redoubling our efforts. Ratcheting goals down should not be the knee-jerk response to roadblocks.

2. Letting our goals master us.
Sometimes all the time and energy we pour into accomplishing something devolves into an unhealthy fixation. When that happens, we can lose perspective, rationalize poor choices, and detach from our core values. Letting this happen can result in health and relationship problems or ethical failures and regrets.

3. Investing too much of our identity and self-worth in whether we achieve our goals.

There's nothing wrong with being committed to our goals. Far from it. But if we judge our identity and worth by whether we always achieve our goals, we're essentially placing our happiness in unreliable hands because we can't control all the variables.

Sometimes we get ill, or face a family crisis or unexpected work challenge, or the market turns, or a recession or pandemic hits. At the end of the day, are we only goal-striving machines, or are we worthy of love and respect regardless of the fickle ups and downs of fate? In her book, *The How of Happiness*, researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky notes that "happiness will come from pursuing goals, and not necessarily from achieving them."

> *"We are not devastated by failing to obtain a goal. We're only devastated when our sense of self-esteem and self-worth are dependent upon achievement of that goal."*
> **-William James, American philosopher and psychologist**

4. Undermining our intrinsic motivation.

When we try to supercharge our motivation by seeking extrinsic rewards (like praise, awards, or fame), it can sap our interest and enthusiasm, according to researchers, by turning what we previously viewed as play into work.

5. Not updating our goals as we learn more about ourselves and as we grow and develop through life's chapters.

With each chapter of our lives come new experiences and hard-earned wisdom. And our priorities are likely to change as we go through the seasons of life. Young people, according to the research, are more drawn to goals that involve experiencing novelty and gathering new information or knowledge, while older people tend to be more interested in emotionally meaningful goals and personal connections.

6. Losing steam in our goal-pursuit.

As humans, we often struggle with the future when it comes to our motivational hardwiring. When something is far off in time, and our immediate experience with things involves challenge and frustration, we tend to slack off—at least until the immediacy of a deadline or fear of failing can kick us into gear.

Reflection Questions

1. How are things going with your goal-setting and goal-pursuit?
2. Which of these mistakes, if any, have you made or are you making?
3. What will you do about it, starting today?

Chapter 2 Postscript:
Inspirations on Common Mistakes with Goals

"Make sure your vision or goal is not an inflated image of yourself and therefore a concealed form of ego, such as wanting to become a movie star, a famous writer, or a wealthy entrepreneur. Also make sure your goal is not focused on having this or that, such as a mansion by the sea, your own company, or ten million dollars in the bank…. Instead of seeing yourself as a famous actor and writer and so on, see yourself inspiring countless people with your work and enriching their lives. Feel how that activity enriches or deepens not only your life but that of countless others." -**Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth***

"Career goals that once felt safe and certain can appear ludicrous… when examined in the light of more self-knowledge. Our work preferences and our life preferences do not stay the same, because we do not stay the same." -**David Epstein, *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World***
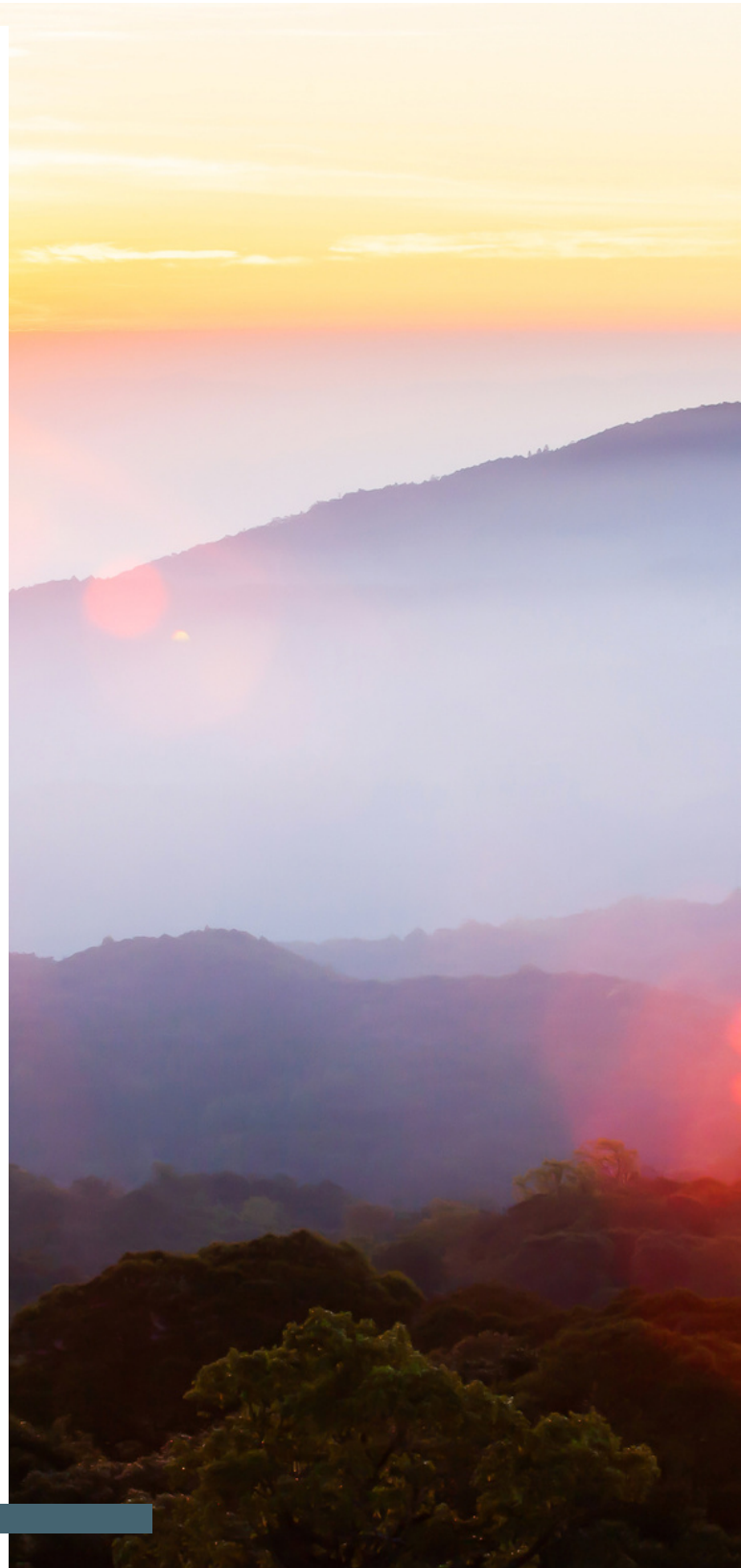
Chapter 3

Goal-Setting Best Practices: Beyond SMART Goals

Goals are common in our life and work. But that doesn't mean we're good at setting and achieving them. Far from it.

How many goals have we missed over the years? For most people, it's many. What's going on?

Here we address what the research says about best practices in goal-setting and offer new criteria to use in goal-setting in two areas: first, in terms of setting individual goals and, second, in terms of evaluating a draft set of goals for quality and coherence. Before that, we take a quick look at existing goal-setting frameworks.

SMART Goals and Other Frameworks

There are different approaches to goal-setting in the literature and in practice. For example, researcher Edwin A. Locke identified *five factors* (clarity, challenge, commitment, feedback, and complexity), while University of Washington psychologist Frank L. Smoll identified three essential features of effective goal-setting (the "*A-B-C of goals*": achievable, believable, and committed). In an *MIT Sloan Management Review* article, Donald Sull and Charles Sull recommend setting "*FAST goals*": frequently discussed, ambitious, specific, and transparent.

The most famous formulation, of course, is "*SMART goals*," developed by consultant George T. Doran, who proposed the SMART framework in a 1981 *Management Review* (*AMA Forum*) article. Here's how Doran originally defined this approach:

• **Specific**: target a specific area for improvement.
• **Measurable**: quantify or at least suggest an indicator of progress.
• **Assignable**: specify who will do it (note that many people these days use "achievable" or "attainable" instead of "assignable").
• **Realistic**: state which results can realistically be achieved, given available resources (some people use "relevant" here).
• **Time-related**: specify when the result(s) can be achieved (or "time-bound").

SMART goals are useful but insufficient. It's a popular and memorable framework but missing several essential elements that are important for setting goals. Also, it doesn't address how our goals may or may not hang well together. We address both facets of goal-setting in turn below.

Criteria to Use in Setting Each Individual Goal

We begin with goal-setting criteria. Here are 7 criteria we should use in setting our individual goals:

1. Important to us
Set goals we can commit to wholeheartedly, knowing they'll summon our dedication and resolve because they matter to us. We can even begin with the question: *What's most important to achieve now* (or in the time period of our choosing, whether it's the next quarter or year)?

2. Authentic
According to psychology researchers Ken Sheldon and Andrew Elliot, we're happier, healthier, and more hard-working when we're pursuing goals that are authentic to us and determined by us, not by others. In other words, our goals should be "*self-concordant*": consistent with our core values and deeply held interests. A bonus: we experience bigger boosts in happiness when we achieve such goals.[2]

> "The more that we choose our goals based on our values and principles, the more we enter into a positive cycle of energy, success, and satisfaction."
> -Neil Farber, Canadian contemporary artist

3. Purposeful
We must be clear about the why behind our goals: *Why do we want to achieve our goals? What benefits can we expect when we succeed*? Ideally, our goals flow naturally from our personal purpose, core values, and vision of the good life.

4. Intrinsically motivating
Intrinsic motivation is the inner drive we have to do things out of our interest, enjoyment, or inherent satisfaction, rather than the desire for a reward (extrinsic motivation). According to researchers, intrinsic motivation is generally more potent than extrinsic motivation. When we work on things that are intrinsically motivating, it tends to involve us deeply and feel personally rewarding, pleasurable, and meaningful.

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[2] Sheldon, K.M., and Elliot, A.J. (1999). Goal striving, need satisfaction, and longitudinal well-being: The self-concordance model. *Journal Personality and Social Psychology*, 76: 546-57.

According to researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky in her book, *The How of Happiness*, "Numerous psychological studies have shown that across a variety of cultures, people whose primary life goals are intrinsically rewarding obtain more satisfaction and pleasure from their pursuits."[3] Why? Such activities are enjoyable and inspiring to us, making us more likely to invest in and persevere and succeed at them. Also, they're more likely to fulfill our core needs, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness (see self-determination theory).

"*If you want to be happy, set a goal that commands your thoughts, liberates your energy, and inspires your hopes.*"
-Andrew Carnegie, Scottish-American industrialist and philanthropist

5. Clear and measurable
A big problem with many goals is that they lack clarity and specificity. This dilutes the accountability factor. The clearer we are about what we seek to achieve, the more motivated we'll be in our pursuit. And goals must be measurable. As the saying goes, we don't get what we don't measure.

6. Time-bound
If we don't indicate the target date for accomplishment, we risk letting progress slip indefinitely and losing motivation. Effectively, our goals have no teeth. There's no better motivator than a hard deadline.

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[3] Also, according to a study of job satisfaction based on data from hundreds of workers, the ones who concentrated on intrinsic professional goals were significantly more satisfied with their jobs than those who didn't. Source: Judge, T. A., Bono, J. E., Erez, A., & Locke, E. A. (2005). Core Self-Evaluations and Job and Life Satisfaction: The Role of Self-Concordance and Goal Attainment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90(2), 257–268.

7. Challenging but achievable

If a goal is too easy to achieve, it won't inspire a sense of urgency and awaken the arousal systems in our brains. But we should avoid making a goal too arduous, because we're unlikely to reach it if we don't think we can. If we believe we might be able to achieve a difficult goal if we put in a lot of effort, that's a good sign.[4]

It's also good sometimes to have "stretch goals"—or what authors Jim Collins and Jerry Porras call "big, hairy, audacious goals" or "BHAGs." These are goals that would really take our breath away if we were able to achieve them. But again, feasibility is important.

> *"Stretch goals can be crushing if people don't believe they're achievable."*
> **-John Doerr, *Measure What Matters***

Criteria for Assessing a Draft Set of Goals

There's no shortage of criteria for individual goals out there, but it's rare to see frameworks for how to assess a draft set of goals and whether they're appropriate as a collection. Here are three criteria to use for that important analysis. The set of goals should be:

A. Highly selective
As we set goals, we must continually ask: *Is this the right priority now? What's the "opportunity cost"*—the cost of the time and energy that could be spent in other pursuits? Ideally, we have only a few goals we're focused on during a certain period—or a handful at most.

Psychologists note the problem of "goal competition" in which our goals can compete with one another for our time and attention. Essentially, the biggest barrier to one goal may be our other goals.

We tend to be too ambitious and set too many goals. By limiting our goals to the bare essentials, we help focus our energies. When in doubt, reduce the number of goals. Less is more.

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[4] More than a thousand studies have shown that setting goals that are challenging and specific (versus easy and vague goals) is linked to increased motivation, persistence, and task performance. According to decades of research on goals by psychologist Edwin A. Locke, a pioneer in the field, setting goals improves performance. Also, hard-to-achieve goals improve performance more than easy-to-achieve goals, and having specific targets in our goals improves their effectiveness. Source: Edwin A. Locke, Toward a theory of task motivation and incentives, *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, Volume 3, Issue 2, 1968, 157-189.

"We must realize—and act on the realization—
that if we try to focus on everything, we focus on nothing."
-John Doerr, *Measure What Matters*
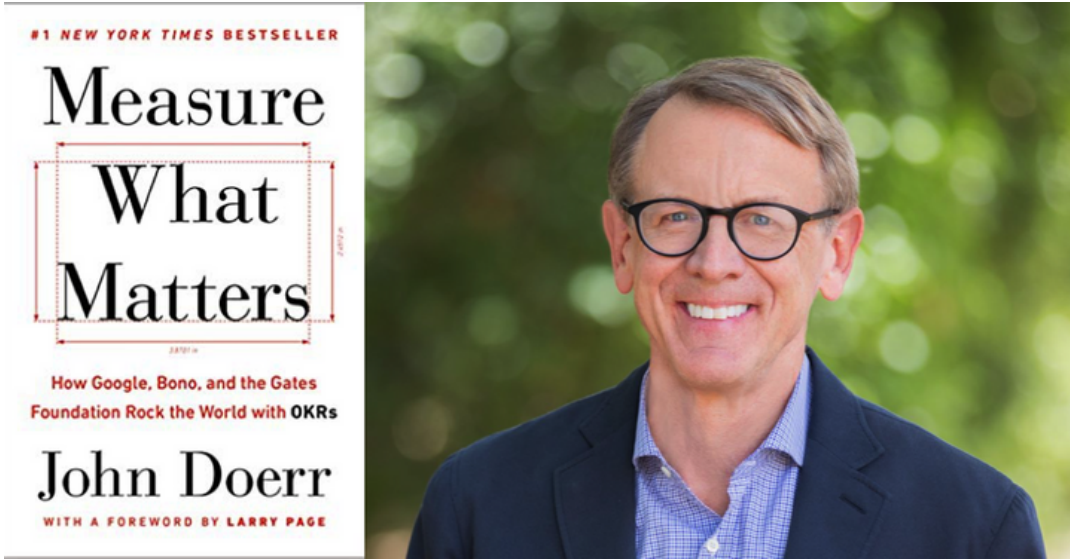
B. Complementary

We must ensure that our chosen goals hang well together. We want them to add up to a powerful whole. And we should ensure that they don't work at cross-purposes. Ideally, we look forward to our vision of the good life and think about what goals would move us in that direction.

C. Prioritized

We should arrange our goals in order of importance, from most important to least. Doing that will help us know which one to focus on if our goals end up competing for our time or resources.

Also, it's extremely valuable to have total clarity about what our top-priority goal is. When people fail to achieve their goals, one common reason is overwhelm. There's great power in having a singular focus—a rallying aim. There's power in drawing a dividing line between what matters most and, well, everything else. If we don't identify our top goal, we risk dilution and diffusion.

Criteria for Each Goal:
1. Important to me: goals you can commit to wholeheartedly, knowing they'll summon your dedication and resolve because they matter.
2. Authentic: goals determined by you, not others, and consistent with your core values and interests.
3. Purposeful: goals that have a clear "why" behind them, with aims that feel meaningful or significant to you.
4. Intrinsically motivating: goals you want to pursue out of interest, enjoyment, or inherent satisfaction, rather than the desire for a reward.
5. Clear and measurable: goals that are easy to understand and free from ambiguity—and that you're able to quantify and determine without doubt if you've achieved them.
6. Time-bound: goals with a specific target date for accomplishing them.
7. Challenging but achievable: goals that are difficult and demanding, testing your abilities or determination, but also attainable with much effort.
Criteria for the Whole Set of Goals:
A. Highly selective: a short list of no more than five goals that are the most important to you right now.
B. Complementary: goals that hang well together and that would add up to a powerful and complete whole for you.
C. Prioritized: goals in order of their importance to show you which one(s) to focus on if there are conflicts and to ensure you know which one must be dealt with before others.

For a more robust online version with advanced functionality, go here: https://greggvanourek.com/goal-setting-template

Conclusion

Since we're so accustomed to goal-setting, we may take it for granted and believe we've got it down. But if we had a true scorecard for all the goals we set, it would probably reveal a high percentage of abandoned or downgraded goals.

By using these 7 criteria for setting individual goals and 3 criteria for assessing our draft collection of goals, we can dramatically up our goals game.

Reflection Questions

1. How are you doing in terms of these goal-setting criteria?
2. What changes do you need to make in your goals?

Appendix: OKRs

Many organizations nowadays use a management framework and goal-setting system called "Objectives and Key Results" (OKRs). This method was pioneered at Intel and is used by many organizations, including Alphabet/Google, Coursera, Disney, Exxon, the Gates Foundation, Intuit, MyFitnessPal, Nuna, and Remind (and many people, including Bono, the lead singer of U2, in his efforts to fight extreme poverty and preventable disease via the ONE Campaign).

In this OKR framework, the *objectives* are the concrete things we seek to achieve. In his book, *Measure What Matters: How Google, Bono, and the Gates Foundation Rock the World with OKRs*, legendary venture capitalist John Doerr recommends that objectives are "significant, concrete, action-oriented, and (ideally) inspirational." He notes that they're a "vaccine against fuzzy thinking—and fuzzy execution."

The *key results* indicate how we can reach the chosen objectives. Doerr recommends ensuring that KRs are specific, time-bound, aggressive yet realistic, measurable, and verifiable.
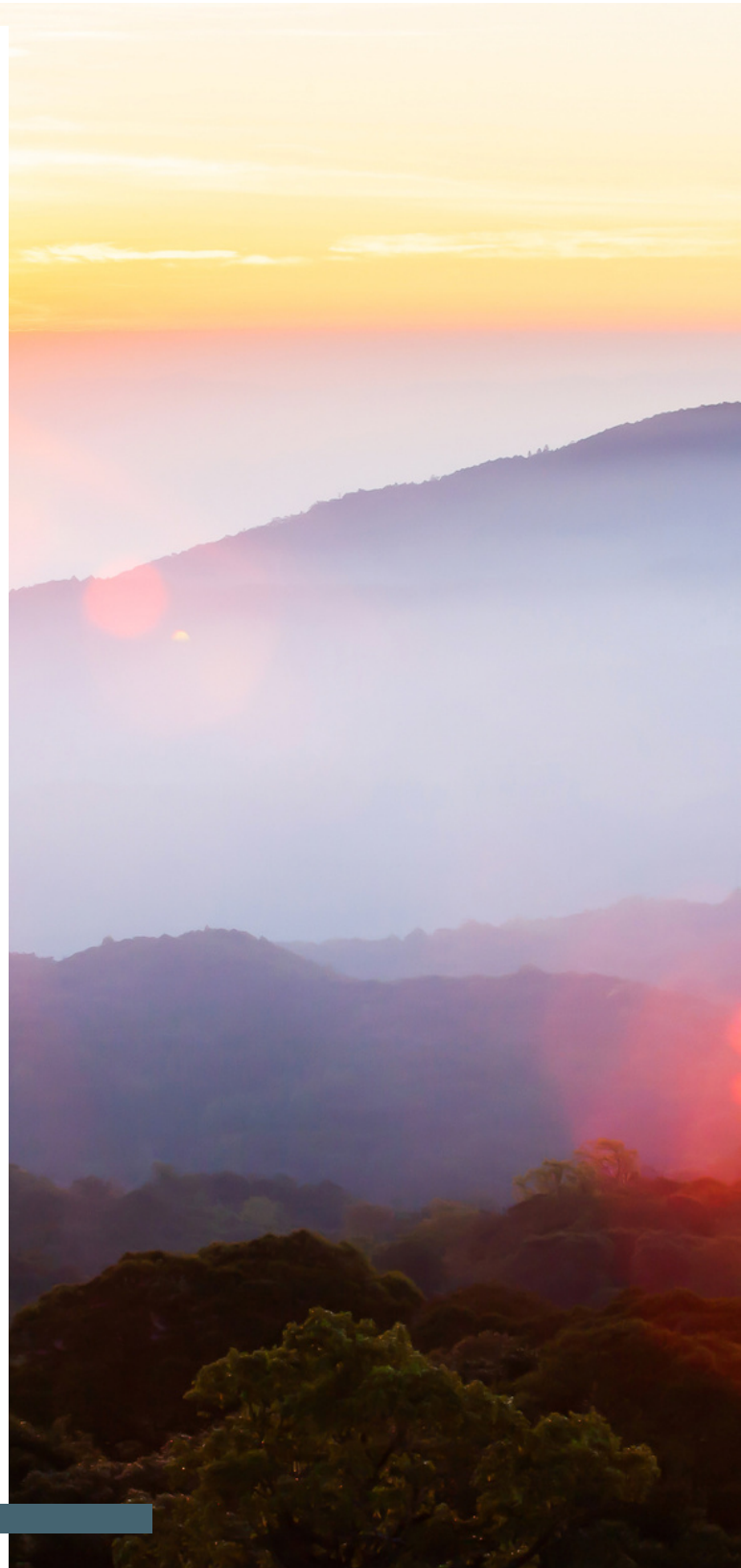
Chapter 3 Postscript:
Inspirations on Setting Goals

"Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss it you will land among the stars."
-**Les Brown, speaker and former member of the Ohio House of Representatives**

"The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it."
-Michelangelo, Italian sculptor and painter

Chapter 4

Goal-Pursuit: Best Practices

Many of us are no strangers to setting goals. We've been doing it for a long time.

But how are we doing when it comes to goal attainment? Do we know?

Many of us fall short of our goals fairly often. Sometimes the problem is in the goal-setting process. But in other cases, the problem is in our goal-pursuit process—something very few of us have learned about.

This chapter outlines best practices in pursuing goals. These practices are important not only because they can dramatically boost our chances of achieving our goals but also because the goal-pursuit process can boost our happiness. In her book, *The How of Happiness*, researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky notes the following:

> *"...the process of working toward a goal, participating in a valued and challenging activity, is as important to well-being as its attainment....*
> *Working toward a meaningful life goal is one of the*
> *most important strategies for becoming lastingly happier."*

How to Pursue Goals: Best Practices
It's one thing to determine which goals to set and another thing to determine how best to go about *pursuing* our goals. What does the research tell us about effective goal-pursuit? Here are the findings, broken down into four principal areas: 1. mindset, 2. people, 3. techniques, and 4. systems.

1. Goal-Pursuit Mindset
Here are things we can do to ensure we have a productive mindset for our goal-pursuit efforts:

Reflect on the importance of the goal.

This should include how our goal relates to our purpose, core values, and vision of the good life. Doing so will help us achieve more clarity and boost our motivation, both of which are essential. We're wise to revisit this during the process, especially if our motivation begins to fade.

Visualize success or failure, depending on our motivation level.

Visualization can help us in our goal-pursuit, but whether and how it does so depend on our motivation level—specifically whether we're already motivated to do the things necessary to achieve the goal or not.

- If we're *already motivated* to do the things necessary to achieve a goal, then yes, spending some time (e.g., one to five minutes) visualizing the scenario of achieving our goal can be helpful because it focuses our mind on a successful result.

- But if we're *not already motivated* to do the things necessary to achieve a goal, then such visualization probably won't be helpful. Instead, we should spend some time (again, one to five minutes) visualizing failure to achieve our goal and what that would feel like. In that scenario, we're essentially scaring ourselves into doing the work necessary in order to avoid the pain and regret of failure. This works because it recruits certain elements of our autonomic nervous system and creates shifts in the release of hormones like epinephrine (adrenaline), norepinephrine, and dopamine.

Focus on who we wish to become through our goal-pursuit, not just on what we want to achieve.

If we become the kind of person who makes healthy food choices or who exercises daily, those behaviors become automatic. We don't have to keep engaging our willpower. If we focus only on what we want to achieve, we risk a letdown when we've achieved our goal. We essentially put ourselves on an endless goal-pursuit treadmill. And we're never satisfied there with who or where we are. We just keep running. Instead, we're wise to gain clarity on what success, happiness, and a good life actually mean to us.

> *"The most effective way to change your habits is to focus not on what you want to achieve, but on who you wish to become…. Your identity emerges out of your habits. Every action is a vote for the type of person you wish to become."*
> **-James Clear, author**

Anticipate setbacks.

Don't expect goal-pursuit to run smoothly all the time. Adopt a mindset of vigilance. We're all imperfect and we all encounter changing contexts and new challenges. If or when there's a roadblock or letdown, commit to getting back on track right away.

2. The People Factor in Goal-Pursuit

Here are things we can do to make sure we're connecting with people effectively as we pursue our goals:

Identify people who can help us achieve our goals.
Goal-pursuit is not a solo endeavor. Sometimes we can save a lot of time and hassle by getting input or encouragement from people who have walked a similar path.

Recruit someone to hold us accountable for consistent work toward our goals.
When we pair up with others or have a trainer, coach, or mentor to guide us through the process, we boost our chances of sticking with the process. Group support is one of the reasons groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and others are so effective. According to the research, it doesn't help as much to tell people broadly about our goal, such as by announcing it publicly on social media. Why? Because the positive feedback we get from others tends to dissipate quickly. Better to have a consistent accountability partner or support group.

Surround ourselves with people who support our goal-pursuit (or who have similar goals).
There's strength and safety in numbers. And there's value in becoming part of a group or community of people committed to goal-pursuit. We're social beings, so we don't want others to view us as someone who lets others down or who doesn't honor commitments.

3. Goal-Pursuit Techniques

Here are techniques to employ when pursuing our goals:

Devise strategies to make pursuing our goal(s) more enjoyable.
For example, are there any parts of our goal-pursuit process that we can engage in with a friend? Can we do the work in an enjoyable setting and at a time in which we can focus without interruption? Can we find ways to employ our strengths and passions when pursuing our goals—and get help from people who have strengths in areas where we need help?
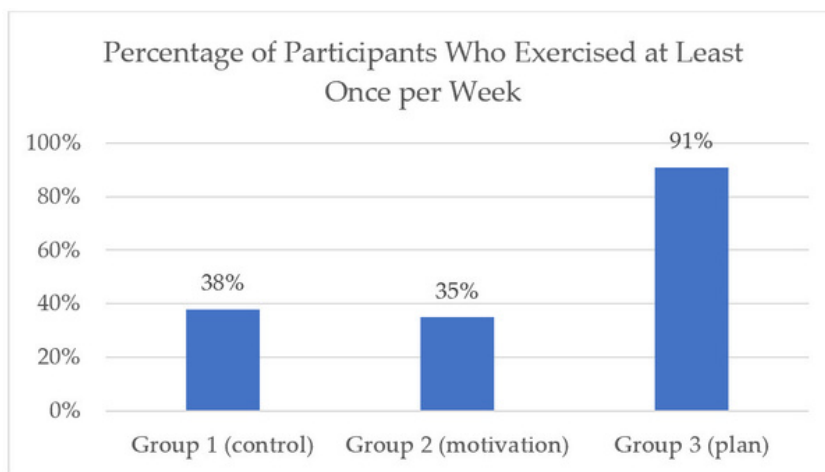
Employ "implementation intentions."

It's important to engage in planning and map out our time with a clear roadmap. According to the research, using "*implementation intentions*"—specific plans attached to our goals that spell out when and where we'll do things—can more than double the probability of achieving challenging goals.[5] Hundreds of studies in the research literature have demonstrated the efficacy of implementation intentions.

Part of the value here is anticipating obstacles and thinking about ways to overcome them. Since our motivation is usually highest when we're setting a goal, this approach can keep us from abandoning our goal when things get difficult. The formula for an implementation intention is as follows:

"I will (BEHAVIOR) at (TIME) in (PLACE)."

Here's an example: "*I will exercise for 30 minutes at the gym during my lunch break.*" In a study of 248 people and their exercise habits reported in the *British Journal of Health Psychology*, researchers placed the people into three groups: a control group (asked to track how often they exercised), a "motivation" group (asked to track their workouts and to learn from the researchers about the benefits of exercise), and a "plan" group (who got the same presentation as the second group but were also asked to formulate implementation intentions for when and where they'd exercise).

The results: a much higher percentage of people in the third group exercised at least once a week (91% vs. 38% in the control group and 35% in the motivation group).

Percentage of Participants Who Exercised at Least Once per Week

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[5] Gollwitzer, P.M., and Brandstatter, V. (1997). Implementation intentions and effective goal pursuit. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73(1), 186.

Recommendation: write down our plans by hand. Why? Doing so engages our neural circuitry and embeds knowledge in our nervous system. It's ideal to have a measurable amount of time we'll spend each week in our goal pursuits (e.g., go to the gym X times per week for at least 45 minutes each time).

Write out our top-priority goal each day on a new Post-it note and place it in a different spot each day.
This will help keep it top of mind. If we write out one reminder and place it in the same place for weeks, we'll stop noticing it. It becomes almost invisible. The key is not only daily reinforcement but also variety.

Break more challenging and complex goals down into smaller chunks of sequential milestones or sub-goals.
This can help us avoid the prospect of losing motivation along the way. Motivation tends to be high at the beginning, with the excitement of launching, and near the end, when the finish line is in sight, but often flags in the middle.

Reward ourselves for successful completion of some (but not all) milestones along the way toward our ultimate goal. With this approach, we avoid the trap of using achievement of the goal itself as the only reward. Tip: try "*random intermittent reinforcement*." Essentially, randomly determining whether we get such a mini-reward along the way is better than giving ourselves a reward for each milestone. Here we're borrowing a tactic from casinos, which use random reinforcements to keep people gambling at the slot machines. Essentially, we're keeping ourselves primed for reward-seeking—albeit through productive behavior.

Review progress and make adjustments as we go.
If need be, we can adjust our goals. Some goals become obsolete as things change around us. In other cases, we should stop pursuing a goal—and perhaps start pursuing a different one.
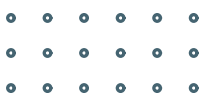
4. Goal-Pursuit Systems

We're wise to develop systems and habits that increase the likelihood of goal attainment instead of simply setting goals and trying to reach them.

> "Goals are about the results you want to achieve. Systems are about the processes that lead to those results.... Goals are good for setting a direction, but systems are best for making progress. A handful of problems arise when you spend too much time thinking about your goals and not enough time designing your systems....
> You do not rise to the level of your goals.
> You fall to the level of your systems."
>
> -James Clear, *Atomic Habits*

Here are things we can do to build systems and foster habits that contribute to our goal-pursuit efforts:

Use a daily log to track progress toward our goals.
As the saying goes, we don't get what we don't measure. It's not only measurement that makes this effective but also progress. Harvard Business School professor Teresa Amabile and her colleagues spent many years studying the psychological experiences and performance of people doing complex and creative work in organizations. Through this work, they identified the power of small wins and what they call the "*progress principle*":

> *"Of all the things that can boost emotions, motivation, and perceptions during a workday, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work. And the more frequently people experience that sense of progress, the more likely they are to be creatively productive in the long run. Whether they are trying to solve a major scientific mystery or simply produce a high-quality product or service, everyday progress—even a small win—can make all the difference in how they feel and perform."*
> **-Teresa M. Amabile and Steven J. Kramer, "The Power of Small Wins,"**
> ***Harvard Business Review*, May 2011**

In an attempt to discover what leads to a positive inner work life (a favorable set of emotions, perceptions, and motivations), they compared the events from workers' best days at work to those on their worst days. Their finding:

> *"The results were startlingly clear: the single most important contributor to positive inner work life was simply making progress on meaningful work. This is the progress principle. In fact, 76% of our participants' very best days involved making progress. This dwarfed any other kind of event mentioned in the diaries on those days."*

For the progress principle to work, they found, the work must be meaningful in some way to the workers—not necessarily in the sense of lofty aims but rather in the sense of working on valuable products or services for customers or otherwise "contributing to something worthwhile." What characterized their worst days at work? When workers experienced setbacks or had their progress blocked.[6]

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[6] The negative effects of those blocks on progress were, according to the research, "two to three times stronger than the positive effects of progress."

According to social psychologist Jonathan Haidt in his book, *The Happiness Hypothesis,* "Pleasure comes more from making progress toward goals than from achieving them."

Employ reliable mechanisms to help ourselves stick with the goal-pursuit process. Such mechanisms will come in handy if our motivation flags or if we fall into the procrastination trap. There are many possibilities. For example, we can commit to sending *weekly progress reports* to a friend or colleague. According to research, people who did this achieved a significantly higher percentage of their objectives.

With a "*don't break the chain*" approach, we can keep a tally of how many days in a row we've followed our plan, and we have to start over if we miss a day. This approach gives positive reinforcement for consistent effort and negative feedback when we fall short. Example: we can take a large calendar with the entire year on one page and hang it on a wall. For each day that we accomplish our predetermined tasks, we place a big red "X" over that day on the calendar.

With a *"precommitment" approach*, we promise a friend that we'll give them money for each day we miss our targets. The idea is to give ourselves strong incentives to continue with the daily work.

With a *"measure backward" approach*, we take stock of progress at the end of each week on key metrics relevant to our goal, showing our progress and making us want to avoid the pain of falling short.

And with the *"paper clip method,"* we place two jars on our desk: one filled with paper clips and another that's empty. Whenever we take a distinctive step toward our goal, we take one paper clip out of the full jar and place it into the empty one. We keep going until we've achieved our goal.

Prime our environment to promote habits of goal-pursuit. Too often, our environment works against our goal-pursuit, for example, via distractions and temptations that waste our time. (That can include some of the people around us.) James Clear calls our environment the "invisible hand" that shapes our behavior. "Create an environment," he advises, "where doing the right thing is as easy as possible." Example: set out our workout clothes the night before so we're primed to exercise in the morning.

Leverage technology to help us automate our goal-pursuit.
We can use technology to automate things that we do, or should do, repeatedly (e.g., automatic deposits in our savings accounts). Also, we can use our digital calendar to ensure we're focusing on the right things at the right time, building goal-pursuit activities into our schedule and benefiting from the digital reminders. We can also use tools like focus/silent mode, habit trackers, and streaks on our digital devices.

Eliminate the triggers that get in the way of our goal-pursuit.
We can remove the television and other devices from the bedroom and turn off smartphone notifications. Also, we can delete apps or games from our devices, and we can stop putting junk snacks in the pantry.

Reflection Questions

1. Which of these goal-pursuit practices are you already employing?
2. Which new ones will you try?
3. How else can you improve your goal-pursuit efforts?

Chapter 4 Postscript:
Inspirations on Goal-Pursuit

"Success is the product of daily habits—not once-in-a-lifetime transformations." -**James Clear, author**

"We are kept from our goal not by obstacles but by a clear path to a lesser goal." -**Robert Brault, author**

"What you get by achieving your goals is not as important as what you become by achieving your goals." -**Zig Ziglar, author, salesperson, and speaker**

"...every organization, if it wants to create a sense of alignment and focus, must have a single top priority within a given period of time." -**Patrick Lencioni,** ***The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business***
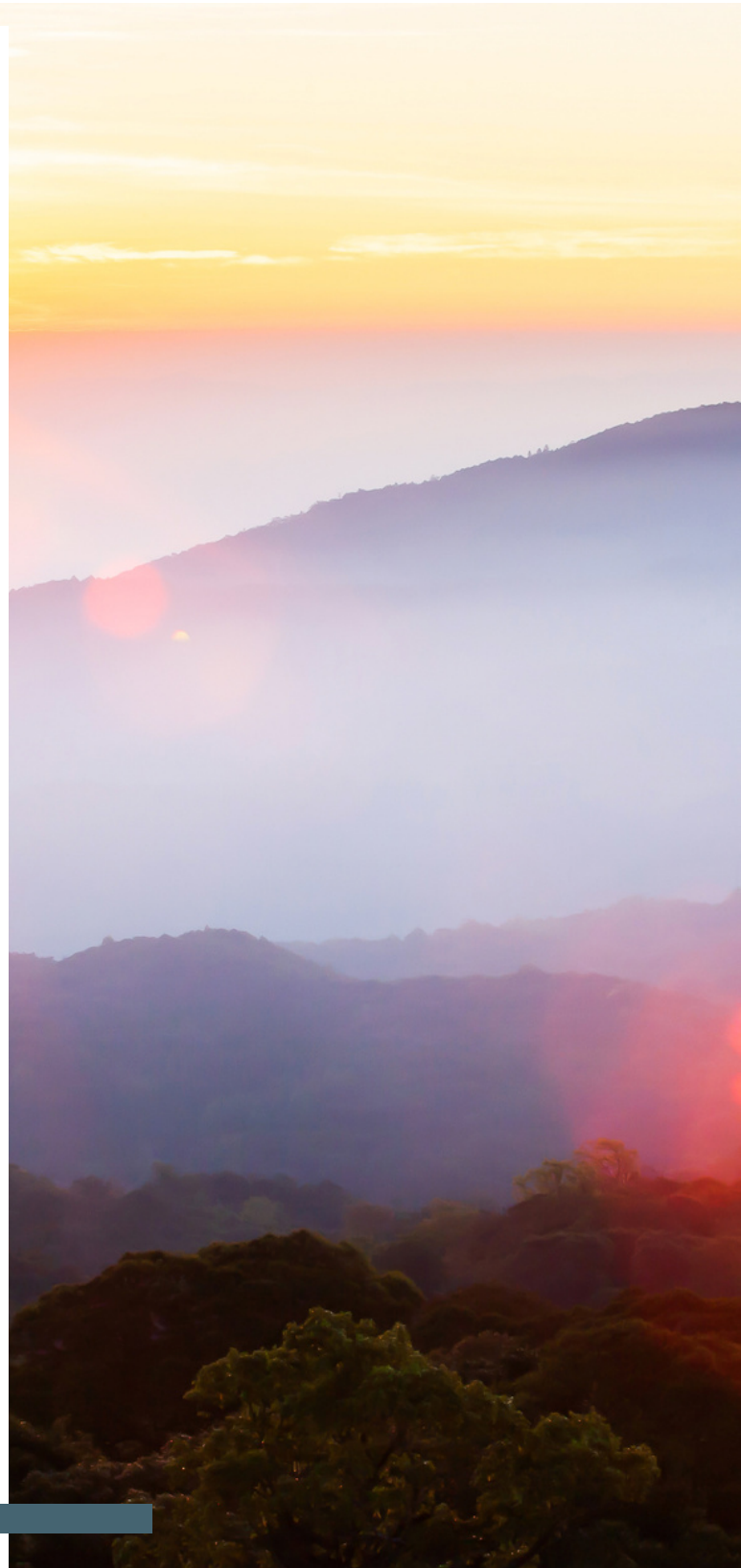
Related Articles and Resources

Goal Setting Template

https://greggvanourek.com/goal-setting-template

"The Benefits of Setting and Pursuing Goals"

https://greggvanourek.com/benefits-of-goals/

"The Most Common Mistakes in Goal-Setting and Goal-Pursuit"

https://greggvanourek.com/mistakes-in-goal-setting/

"Goal-Setting Best Practices: Beyond SMART Goals"

https://greggvanourek.com/goal-setting-best-practices

"Goal-Pursuit: Best Practices"

https://greggvanourek.com/goal-pursuit-best-practices

"The Problem with Lack of Focus—And How to Fix It"

https://greggvanourek.com/problem-with-lack-of-focus/

"The Incredible Benefits of Being Action-Oriented"

https://greggvanourek.com/action-oriented/

"The Trap of Bad Habits—And How to Break Them"

https://greggvanourek.com/trap-of-bad-habits/

Huberman Lab Podcast,
"Goals Toolkit: How to Set & Achieve Your Goals," Aug 27, 2023

https://www.hubermanlab.com/episode/goals-toolkit-how-to-set-achieve-your-goals

John Doerr,
"Why the Secret of Success Is Setting the Right Goals" TED talk

https://www.ted.com/talks/john_doerr_why_the_secret_to_success_is_setting_the_right_goals

About the Author

Gregg Vanourek is a writer, teacher, TEDx speaker, and coach on personal development and leadership. He's worked at market-leading ventures across industries and sectors. He runs Gregg Vanourek LLC and teaches at the Stockholm Business School Executive MBA program. Gregg was a tech startup executive at K12 Inc. (now a market leader with $1 billion in sales) and co-founded New Mountain Ventures (developing entrepreneurial leaders).

Gregg is co-author of three influential books, including *LIFE Entrepreneurs: Ordinary People Creating Extraordinary Lives* (a clarion call for infusing our life with passion and purpose) and *Triple Crown Leadership: Building Excellent, Ethical, and Enduring Organizations* (a winner of the International Book Awards). His books, workshops, and talks are appreciated by thousands of leaders, changemakers, career changers, and seekers, many of whom have reinvented their life and work with Gregg's tools as a guide. His writing has appeared in or been reviewed by *Fast Company, BusinessWeek, U.S. News & World Report, New York Times, Entrepreneur, Inc., Harvard Business blogs*, and more.

Gregg has given talks in many countries, including Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, France, Italy, Malaysia, Sweden, and many U.S. states. His TEDx talk is a call to focus on discovering who we are and what we value so we can avoid the common traps of living and leading.

Having lived, worked, and studied in both the U.S. and Europe, Gregg was Vice Director of the Entrepreneurship and Innovation Management Program at KTH-Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, and Vice Center Director for the award-winning Stockholm School of Entrepreneurship at KTH. He served as Chairman of the Board of SE Forum (a global social entrepreneurship accelerator) in Stockholm.

He taught thousands of students over a decade at different universities in Stockholm and Denver in executive and master's courses. Gregg was a senior vice president at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (which he helped to launch), research fellow at the Hudson Institute (think tank), and board member of the Vail Alliance and Vail Leadership Institute.
Gregg graduated from the Yale School of Management (M.B.A.), London School of Economics and Political Science (M.Sc.), and Claremont McKenna College (B.A., magna cum laude), where he was an Academic All American soccer player.

He lives near Denver, Colorado with his wife and daughters.

Contact and Links

Email:
gregg@greggvanourek.com

Web Sites:
https://greggvanourek.com
https://triplecrownleadership.com

Goal Setting Template:
https://greggvanourek.com/goal-setting-template

Traps Test (Common Traps of Living):
https://greggvanourek.com/traps-test

Quality of Life Assessment:
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Leadership Derailers Assessment:
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Facebook:
https://www.facebook.com/TripleCrownLeadership

X (formerly Twitter):
@gvanourek
@TripleCrownLead