

What do you *Really* Want: an Examination of the Pursuit of Goal Setting in Coaching

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Abstract

This article examines what appears to be a societal compulsion towards goal pursuit and target setting within a coaching context. It explores the dissonance between coaching principles and coaching practice and the negative consequences of such a target driven culture. Concerns are that practitioners adopt models and ways of working that are too simplistic to negotiate the multifaceted nature of human motivation. A case is made for goal exploration that is subtle, refined and in tune with clients and their preferences. Some recommendations for good practice are offered.

Key Words: Goals, targets, values, purpose, meaning

Introduction

As ‘card carrying’ goal orientated coaches, the authors of this paper were stimulated by a certain sense of unease about what appears to be a cultural compulsion towards a future focused, target driven, repetitive, goal chasing mode of living and working. Such compulsion impacts upon both our professional and personal selves, and we consider it a worthwhile area to explore. An important driver for this exploration is a sense of conflict around values. We wonder how well the values that seem to drive the relentless pursuit of goals fit alongside our personal and professional values and responses.

Within an increasingly future and change oriented culture, there is a growing tendency to overuse and interchange certain ‘buzz’ words such as ‘*solutions, goals, targets, vision and mission*’ and to conflate their meaning. This trend can pervade all areas and levels of society from political policy to the corporate world to the voluntary sector. It is as if there is an ongoing quest to pursue concepts of self determination, ownership, and *ergo* the ability to create our own futures while, in fact, we live in a time of major global uncertainty. Perhaps this goal driven quest is part of a post modernist responsive drive to establish identity and security (Giddens, 1991).

Whatever their purpose, ostensibly goal driven practices can be morally vacuous or misguided. There is a proliferation of systems adopting and developing practices that are *target* driven, yet *outcome* poor and devoid of values other than money or time. Western European governments purport to be goal driven yet many of those goals seem unrelated to value (Glick, 2007). Global corporations have sales targets and profit margins, and public services such as the UK National Health Service increasingly have waiting times and service response times as key goals.

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This may reflect or lead to a way of working that is blinkered, one dimensional and lacking in true richness of experience, even resulting in client, staff or student disengagement. We know that levels of engagement correlate to a number of factors, involvement in key decision making being one (Gallup, 2011). The reduction of goals to tangible outputs without intrinsic meanings is at best confused: at worst, it demonstrates an inability or unwillingness to establish and work towards outcomes which are grounded in values rather than material reward.

It can be argued that such reductionism has huge impact on day to day lives. In the UK, many local medical General Practitioner (GP) services have developed systems whereby appointment waiting times are statistically low, and therefore meet centrally set targets, but achieve this by requiring patients to book within specified times on the day of the required appointment, resulting in many people not being able to get what they want. In another example, under World Health Organisation (WHO) approved guidelines, in some countries anti retroviral drug treatment for HIV is targeted for those at a more advanced stage of infection, as measured by T cell count, than in others, resulting in reduced numbers of people apparently in need of treatment (AVERT, 2011).

On a professional level, some practitioners whose initial motivation is to be helpful become compromised by quantitative definitions of what it is to be efficient. This results in a loss of the principles of worthwhile intention. In our first example surely the real goal for a GP service should be that patients (the consumers) would feel increased trust, confidence and security by making the service more accessible, with a longer term more abstract goal of better health. In the case of HIV work, valued outcomes are complex, and arguably need to be evaluated qualitatively in negotiation with the 'target' population. In other words, clarity of and engagement with the values which underpin stated goals are key. Only when we have such clarity do policy makers have any chance of achieving intended goals (Roberts, Hsaio, Burman & Reich, 2002).

The intentionality behind targets may frequently be lost because they are set and imposed externally, frequently from a centralized system. When this happens, the individual who is intended to work towards, or be beneficiary of the goal may feel disconnected and lack personal investment. Roberts *et al* (2002) suggest that citizen satisfaction with policy is just as important as statistical indicators that are determined by professionals. International research on employee engagement suggests an analogous situation (Blessingwhite, 2011).

Coaching and the discourse of goal setting

Coaches work extensively with goal setting, which seems to be accepted as a *de rigueur* lynch pin of the emergent profession – achieving what we want to, attaining potential, being goal focused, reaching performance related goals (Grant & Cavanagh, 2010; Bluckert, 2006; Jarvis, Lane & Fillery-Travis, 2006), sometimes noted as 'targets' (McLeod, 2003). A challenge for coaches is to keep sight of the importance of attaching meaning or purpose to a 'target' and in turn relate the target to a 'goal'.

To encourage such meaning, coaches might do well to ensure there is enough space for clients to experience the reward and pleasure associated with achieving a goal, and to reorient themselves once the goal is achieved. If goals are experienced as relentlessly sequential, then the coaching profession as a whole may be facilitating and reinforcing the compulsive behaviour of goal pursuit *as an end in itself*. It could be argued that there will be undesirable consequences for society and individuals within it if everyone is expected to remain on a treadmill of goal achieving behaviour.

There is little evidence or research regarding the extent to which a systemic obsession with goals and targets might have been imposed on individuals and the extent to which it has been

embraced by those it may have been imposed on. There is also little research into the costs and consequences of non-involvement in espoused goals, and certainly non-involvement in target setting. Anyone involved in coaching in the public sector is likely to be aware of how employees such as nurses and teachers have at times demonstrated low morale and even apathy; stress levels seem to have increased and absenteeism is at higher than desirable levels. We suggest this is the result of setting targets rather than rounded goals (Gubb, 2009).

Issues for Coaching

In response to some of these issues there are major ideological responses emerging which are extremely relevant in the development of coaching. One is that of workforce planning (Robinson, 2010) and a second the thrust towards the utopia of employee engagement (Perryman & Hayday, 2004). Clear goal setting is an integral step in both processes.

Both involve organisational change and coaching is increasingly championed as an intervention to ignite the process of implementing best practice solutions (Grant, Curtayne & Burton, 2009; Wheeler, 2011). This affords a fantastic opportunity to influence, in a modest and ‘drip drip’ way, the direction that organisations might take, and to be mindful of what we might need to consider is good practice for goal setting. We are in agreement with Whitmore’s contention that as coaches, we have an ethical obligation to be aware of how our interventions affect the specific moral discourse of how a particular company works, and therefore its place within the wider ecology of the world (Whitmore, 2009). As such, perhaps we might explore our own goals (*sic*) and be much more thorough, critical and ethical in how we work with goals, in the profession of coaching.

Exploring the problematic: key issues

In the remainder of this paper, we intend to explore aspects of goal setting which might both impact *how we work*, and reflexively influence the questions we ask. At the crux of our questioning are the values and attitudes we bring to bear in the discourse of goal setting.

In this spirit, then, we consider the following:

First, what is meant by goals, and why are goals seen as key to coaching practice?

Second, what are the possible negative consequences of a goal driven philosophy?

Third, what happens when we achieve our goals?

We will explore these questions one by one in the context of coaching practice.

What is a goal?

The word goal can conjure several different understandings. Some people think of a goal as an *ultimate objective* – often couched in terms of values or emotion – more peace, less stress, more relaxation. Some people think of it in terms of a *behaviour* – I will go to the gym, I will be shouting at the cat less, I will be winning more awards with my team. And some think of goals as *actions or occurrences* – I will win the lottery, I will reduce waiting lists by 10%. The first point we might make is that professional coaches need to be ensuring that their clients know all three aspects detailed above. We refer to the goal ladder (Dexter & Dexter 2008, 2011) as a means of being really thorough about what it is that people want. No goal setting is complete without knowing not only what it is that someone wants more or less of in their life, but also what that will *achieve* for them, in terms of the ultimate *value*.

This is crucial for two reasons, the clarity of the real value being the first. People need to know their ultimate goals so that *anything they then decide to do aligns with that value*. Otherwise, there will be dissonance, which may develop into full blown conflict. Second, when people really know what they want more of in their life in relation to their values, they can be much more creative in finding how many different ways there to get there. Such fully explored goals become much more motivational than the superficial goal which is behaviourally manifested, e.g. ‘I will join the gym’, as if for any reason that behaviour does not happen, we have an idea of what it was going to achieve for us. Once we know that, we can find other ways of attaining the outcome.

Some coaching models and techniques have emerged such as the GROW model and those derived from it, which seem just too simplistic in process to be able to manage the complexity of human motivation. We agree with Clutterbuck (2010) that the danger of this is that coaching becomes mechanistic, critical clues are overlooked and the coach’s agenda can override that of the client. In our experience if identifying goals becomes a mechanical exercise comparable to ‘plucking something out of the air’ then the goals that emerge are likely to lack originality and creativity and in fact will often be a rehash of old goals the client has tried (and failed) to achieve before. Refreshingly, Clutterbuck (2010, p. 73) describes reactions from coach practitioners into his research conclusions on coach practice and in particular goal setting as being, “...pleased to be liberated from the tyranny of overly specific goals”.

Second, the more sophisticated goal orientated models (for example, Egan, 2010) are not always well understood or translated into practice with their subtleties intact. In particular, we suggest that too many practitioners do not spend enough time or use appropriate refinement around facilitating exploration of a broader picture of a client’s preferred future before focusing on specific goals. We see this step of full exploration as being vital – after all, it is material elicited at this stage that should provide a context for any goals. This requires attentive listening so that the practitioner can help the client develop a deeper and more detailed vision of how they would like things to be that includes the emotional themes which would be part of a better future. If clients can recognise on a feelings level exactly *what* about a future scenario is appealing, then they are more likely to be in touch with purpose and meaning, which should be the core of motivation and commitment down the line.

We notice topics on professional social media fora such as ‘what is the most powerful coaching question you can ask?’ This seems to encapsulate a rather rote approach to coaching which can be found in goal setting also. Surely the answer depends on where the intentionality behind a question lies. Questions which inform people’s future decisions should not be seen as literal magic wands to be cavalierly drawn and waved. A question is just a technique: goal setting is a principled activity which might involve a whole lot of techniques.

In reality, it requires a fair degree of skill, knowledge and experience (and some refinement and sophistication in application) to locate effective goal orientated work which is well timed within the context of the coaching process. We urge practitioners to think carefully about use of ‘the miracle question’ or even terms like ‘perfect scenario’. Here one size does *not* fit all! Some clients may respond positively to exploring a ‘perfect’ future whereas others may be unable or unwilling to engage with that concept. Some clients when asked to visualise a perfect future become distressed because although they have that vision it appears so utterly impossible. The skilled coach must know this and have antidotes at hand in order to prevent this motivating strategy becoming disempowering. However, in the latter case, it may be possible to explore how things might be if they were a just a *little* bit better. It requires sensitivity, tentativeness and perhaps negotiation with the client to discover where on the spectrum it is most useful to start the coaching work.

We are sympathetic to White and Epston's (1990) view that narratives which generate a landscape of aspirations, dreams, hopes, values and meaning are ultimately more useful in helping a client to know how to proceed than the mechanics of concrete goals, strategies and action plans. Let us be clear here, we are not arguing against the latter, but simply stating that this is the work that follows a thorough exploration of what the individual really wants. We recommend focusing more on the former - exploring the landscape in some detail so that clients have insight and understanding. They will then feel more confident about choosing where to focus when moving into a goal setting and action planning phase. We want practitioners to have the abilities to help clients develop their vision or dream. In contrast to a child's painting, where the sky is at the top and the sea at the bottom, the sea and sky need to meet. In other words - don't sketch it; paint it properly and with detail. Client and coach are then in a position to look at the real meaning of a goal in the context of a bigger picture.

It is important to remember at this point the theoretical underpinnings of goal orientation. Locke and Latham's research (1990) remains the classic foundation of goal setting. Having established that well thought out goals in the workplace engender better results, Locke and Latham detailed the characteristics that goals should have in order to be effective. They suggested that goals need to be sufficiently complex and challenging to create good results. They therefore also need to embed qualities of aspiration, meaning and purpose.

Mnemonics like SMART(ER), clearly have some value in encouraging specificity and ease of evaluation, yet have become so entrenched in many aspects of lives and business (planning, appraisal etc.) that they are in danger of being somewhat superficially applied at the expense of the less tangible but perhaps more meaningful emotional components of goals. For example, as argued elsewhere, (Dexter, Dexter & Irving, 2011), there are a myriad instances of 'going to the gym' accepted as a full goal, for someone who perhaps wants to be fitter. In a full goal analysis which really attributes value to such fitness, we would argue that this is simply one strategy amongst many. Unless this nuance is fully understood, motivation and commitment is limited and unlikely to drive the client towards full engagement. Going to the gym is a classic example, for some sections of the populous, of a rehashed goal doomed to repetitive failure (Bee, 2008).

We would suggest that one of the reasons for this is that such behavioural goals are not deeply enough embedded in the sense of purpose that needs to be present for fulfilment. A useful goal is firmly linked to purpose – it is expressed strategically, behaviourally, purposefully, and within the client's ethic. If we accept Seligman's (2003) proposition that sense of meaning and purpose is an integral component of happiness, then we begin to see how a purposeful goal becomes linked to motivation, and hence integral to good coaching practice. Motivation always has an end in sight, a desired *outcome* which becomes the reason for any action that takes place. If coaching is linked to development and performance then effective contextualized goal setting and motivation building are some of the integral steps along the journey. Concurrently, we might also agree with Askew and Carnell (2011) that learning of itself is a part of discovering a sense of meaning, and so goal pursuit, while of value, need not become obsessive.

What are the possible negative consequences of a goal driven culture?

We might accept then that a goal needs to be set in relation to purpose, values and outcome, and that goal setting is a fundamental step in motivation. Increasing motivation and pursuing purposeful goals are accepted as integral to coaching practice. However, some possible drawbacks can be identified.

The first arises if goal setting and goal achieving does indeed become mechanistic in the ways outlined above, and as a result is experienced as meaningless and dehumanizing for the client. In other

words, 'full of sound and fury, signifying nothing' to quote Shakespeare (Macbeth, act 5, scene 5, 19–28). From discussions with coach practitioners and from observations of discussion sites we suspect that many coaches can be keen to fill up session time appearing to *do* something instead of having the confidence and/or skill to help the client get to grips with what is *really* going on and what is meaningful to them.

Another danger is that the client may well feel pressure to be a 'good client' and want to please the coach by being seen to be setting goals and dutifully moving towards achieving them. This can manifest in several ways:

- Client may identify goals that they know they can easily achieve (as outlined earlier in our example about appraisals) or work towards the coach's agenda rather than their own.
- We have been aware of instances where the client seems driven to adopt inappropriate goal setting/achieving behaviour almost comparable to addiction or compulsion.
- Worryingly, we also suspect there might be situations where the client's need to please their coach results in them distorting the truth or presenting selective accounts.
- Previously established goals might be 'shelved' or left incomplete, in favour of new ideas which come along and take precedence without careful consideration of priorities.

Maybe, in fact, the client just does not think in terms of goal setting, or maybe the purposeful goal has not yet been discovered.

We wonder also whether we might become so goal driven that we ignore the richness of current experiences, disregarding the pleasure and value of living in the moment and for the moment. Practitioners might become so focused on helping clients to achieve their goals and move towards positive change that they fail to encourage clients to sit back and 'smell the coffee', or savour the experience of the now and appreciate the flavour of achievement. Another analogy might be the tourist of life with camera around shoulder, so eager to capture an experience for the future that they miss the present by investing it in setting up a photo for the record.

Coaches may also forget to encourage their clients to spend some time in maintenance rather than change mode. Many definitions of coaching revel in concepts of change, development and learning. However, maintaining good performance that works well, and indeed maximising the benefits of what works well, is also an extremely valuable aspect of coaching. New goals may not need to appear – the purposeful goal may sometimes simply be standing still and maintaining equilibrium. (Or is capitalist thinking so ingrained in our practice that continuous change and growth are seen as a necessary measure for success?) In corporate settings we have often heard reference to the metaphor of the shark that needs to keep moving forwards to avoid drowning. Interestingly, another way of looking at sharks as a metaphor is that from an evolutionary point of view they have hardly changed for many millions of years because they are so successful at what they do!

Another area that can demonstrate lack of subtlety is the rigidity with which practitioners choose to apply models and techniques, sometimes paying little attention to how well they match the client or the client's needs. In practice this could be felt by the client as inflexible, inappropriate or even cruel. An example is around a growing tendency to encourage clients to phrase goals positively. Whilst we understand the reasoning behind this, perhaps there does need to be more thought as to how rigidly this is applied. We see the trend towards positive framing of goals as sometimes being 'at odds' with a client's orientation. They may not know what they want but they can sometimes be *very*

clear about what they *don't* want. This occurrence is recognised in the work of such pioneers as Bandler and Grinder (1979) and Charvet (1995) when exploring motivation. They note that some people are only motivated when they are in a situation that they *don't* want – a problem avoidance tendency. Yet coaches, and indeed NLP Practitioners, are still exhorted to encourage clients to frame goals and outcomes in terms of what they *do* want. Maybe some people may never conceptualise what they want, yet can be quite satisfied by making sure that they avoid the unwanted. It may then be of more benefit to the client to focus on how to avoid what they *know* they don't want, rather than pushing them to construct a positively framed expression of what they *do* want. Being too dogmatic about positive reframing may result in the client seeing their inability to set 'proper' goals as another failure. If they are *concrete* about what they don't want then this is something to build on and explore, and doing so is likely to build their confidence and increase motivation, thus reaching a valued outcome.

The principle of matching the approach to the client is supported by 'common factors' evidence in therapeutic research that tells us we are more likely to get a positive outcome if we select an approach or a framework that is a good fit with how the client sees themselves, the world, other people and the process of change (Hubble, Duncan and Miller, 2004). We therefore propose a 'client centred' approach to goal setting that develops a structure for working with goals in a way that makes sense to the client and matches their existing preferences and conceptual frameworks.

What happens when we achieve our goals?

As hinted at earlier, we would like to encourage a more measured approach to moving on from the achievement of one goal to the pursuit of another. Hopefully it can be seen how much more fulfilling it might be to build into the process a space for encouraging the client to fully experience the *feelings* associated with achievement in the 'here and now' and to be mindful of the meaning and purpose originally attached to a goal that has been achieved.

As an example, there are 283 mountains in the Scottish Highlands which top 3000 feet - known as the 'Munros'. Although it is possible to understand what might motivate the thousands of 'Munroists' who are driven to climb them *all* as quickly as possible – a challenge against the elements, size of the task etc. - one of us is sometimes puzzled and disappointed to see people struggle their way to the top of a peak, only to tick it off and bound away in search of the next ridge. We regularly hear how we should appreciate the journey but we would also advocate enjoying the arrival and destination. When we get to the top of a Munro we want to sit down - or lie down depending on the exertion and the weather - and eat our lunch! We want to take in the views from the top, smell the air and reflect on our thoughts and feelings about the experience. We like to contemplate other issues in our lives and consider how different they might seem when thought about from such a distance. In particular, we like to think about the challenge and experience and congratulate ourselves and each other on actually getting to the top. In other words we think there is real value in connecting to and reflecting on our actions in the here and now, staying in a state of awareness and allowing ourselves to recognize that "the joy of the present moment is the time when our life is happening" (Bayne, Jinks, Collard and Horton, 2008, p. 120).

We can also learn from Seligman (2003, p. 110) who actually tells us *how* to amplify pleasures, joys and achievements - space pleasures carefully, enter into a reciprocal surprise arrangement with a friend or lover, share pleasures with someone else, take mental photographs, congratulate self, sharpen perceptions, absorb, bask, give thanks and luxuriate. If we accept this, then it is sometimes ok to behave like the 'cat that got the cream' - and perhaps it is time for us to challenge cultures that imply we should always be modest about our achievements and our responses to them and as a result deny ourselves the pleasure of reward.

On the other hand achieving a goal might turn out to be not quite as positive as anticipated. This can happen in a variety of ways. If the goal is significant enough then achieving it is likely to leave the client in a state of transition, which is in itself a process (Sugarman, 2001). At this point the client might benefit from some help 'working through' the transition. Even a positive transition will include certain elements of loss which may need to be addressed before clients can progress to acceptance and integration of their new circumstances and thereby be able to genuinely celebrate their achievement.

Even worse, clients might find themselves in a 'grass is greener on the other side' situation – where something that looked very appealing at the outset turns out to be less so in reality. One of us is working with a client at the moment who has spent a lot of time and effort working on a career change, has made enormous progress with confidence, self esteem and the specific skills of selling or promoting herself on applications and at interview, and as a result has secured the 'dream' job. Frustratingly, six weeks later, she is struggling to cope with the transition, but hesitates to say that she is not sure this is what she wants after all and as a result is very unhappy. We are now exploring the extent to which she had in fact clearly identified a true, purposeful goal and explored all of its possible consequences for herself and those around her before moving towards acquiring 'the dream'.

The coach needs to be really sensitive at this point, support the client, and perhaps educate her about the transition process. Ultimately she needs to work out whether she is in the wrong place or if she had simply thought that *all* her problems would be solved by achieving this goal. She needs to work this out in a measured way and not rush to a decision. For the coach it is about slowing things down and listening to the client, encouraging her to listen to herself and allow time to work through the transition. It is important that she is able to re-orientate herself rather than rushing prematurely into another round of change.

Finally, the day might come when the client finds they are exactly where they wanted to be. It is the right 'place' and no more goals are necessary – or at least not in terms of further forward movement. Perhaps then the possibility of a purposeful goal is simply to remain still within the crucible of achievements and values.

Recommendations for practice

We have raised several questions here, and we hope there is some food for thought about the acceptance of goal setting and chasing as a 'given' in coaching. In practice, this has several implications.

We would recommend that coaches are careful not to be seen to facilitate and reinforce goal pursuit as an end in itself. It is important not to be over reliant on models or techniques that are rigid or too simplistic to take into account the complexity of human motivation, and not to rely on 'powerful' questions such as 'the miracle question' or the use of mnemonics such as SMART(ER) as a substitute for really getting to know the client and their aspirations. We also think it is important to avoid discouraging clients from experiencing the richness and pleasure of the 'here and now' or appreciating and savouring an achievement.

We advocate the use of 'goal laddering' (Dexter et al, 2011:118) to help clients align their goals with their values and to understand what it will mean to them if they achieve their goals (ultimate values). To this end it is important to spend enough time to facilitate exploration of the broader picture of client's preferred future, listening carefully to help them develop a detailed vision which includes emotional themes.

It is necessary to fit the approach to the clients and their preferences when helping them explore the future. This involves using sensitivity and negotiation when choosing where on the spectrum from 'a little better' to 'the ideal picture' to start the work. Coaches should also accept that maintenance of something good is as valuable as change of something faulty, and recognise the value of the clarity and confidence that is gained when clients are able to connect strongly with what it is they *don't* want.

Coaches also need to be prepared to support clients appropriately when they have achieved a goal. This might include helping a client through a transition and dealing with any potential loss associated with change; being prepared to do some maintenance work as well as working on new goals; and building into the coaching process space for clients to savour their achievement, connect with the feelings attached to it, and reflect on how that relates to their original aspirations.

Conclusion

We have suggested that goal setting has become almost a way of life, and that the process has become vulgarized to a practice of target setting which does not in fact relate to meaningful and valuable aspirations. While agreeing the broad value of taking charge of one's direction in life within the contexts and constraints in which we operate, we have suggested a note of caution to the role that coaches may inadvertently play in devaluing really useful goal setting. We have suggested that the term goal be more fully understood, its elicitation skilfully crafted rather than be the subject of a given set of questions, and that the full consequences of a goal be very clearly identified before finding ways to move toward it.

We are also advocating a 'pause and reflect' style of working - resisting the temptation to always work more and more toward change, towards new, different, or additional goals - and staying in the here and now with relish and enjoyment, savouring achievement and being in touch with values. We want to make sure that we can work responsively with all our clients - those who plan through avoidance, those who cannot see beyond next week and those who want the main plan for the next five years. Skilled responsiveness is more important than a set way of working if we are to be ethical coaches.

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