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Goal-Setting

Different Kinds of Goals

1. Long-Term, Medium-Term, Short-Term

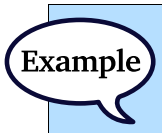
What do you want to have achieved in the near future? What is to be achieved in the long run? Depending on the context, the actual time spans of what you would consider long-term, medium-term or short-term might differ.

A long-term goal can consist of several short-term goals. Ideally the goals are structured hierarchically, i.e., if you have achieved all the short-term goals that belong to a long-term goal, then the long-term goal should be achieved also. If a goal is very complex or intended to be achieved over a very long time, it might make sense to introduce medium-term goals (e.g. Long-term: one year, medium-term: three months, short-term: days).

2. Abstract vs. Specific

Abstract goals are much easier to set as they don't force us to think about the details. The problem is that most of the time they don't help to really engage. The more specific your goal is, the easier it becomes to decide what series of actions is most promising to lead to the desired outcome. A clear image of what it really is that you want to achieve helps you to make the right decisions and guides your actions.

Setting specific goals means that you need to be daring: you risk not (fully) achieving the defined outcome. However, only if there is a possibility to fail, there is a chance to really see your success. You need to be able to check whether you have failed, in order to make your progress visible. Charting your progress can be a major source of motivation, as it gives you the feeling of self-efficacy.



Abstract: *"I want to improve my English".*
→ With this vague goal you almost cannot fail. If you have learned one single word in a whole year, you could consider this goal to be achieved!

Specific: *"In one year, I will be able to follow a conversation between two native speakers on my research topic".*
→ You can check this goal by evaluating your understanding of the conversation. And it is also clear when to check it.

3. Avoidance vs. Approach

Avoidance goals are directed towards avoiding an undesirable outcome: for example something you want to prevent from happening or something you want to stop doing.

Example

- *I will stop spending so much time with social media.*
- *From now on, I will avoid junk food.*
- *I am not shouted at anymore by my supervisor.*

Approach goals are directed towards approaching a desirable outcome: something you want to achieve.

Example

- *I will spend at least an hour a day on paper-reading.*
- *I will keep to a well-balanced diet.*
- *My supervisor will realize that I do good work.*

Approach goals have been shown to be much more effective at fostering internal motivation than avoidance goals, while avoidance goals very often increase the stress level. Hence, in most cases, it is desirable to formulate approach goals. However, they tend to be more difficult to define. Most of the time we are more aware of what we don't want than of what we want in its place.

Example

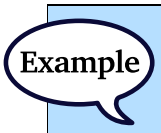
While it is easy to say: "Don't waste your time on social media!", It is difficult to make it an approach goal.

Questions that might help, are "Why do I want to stop it?", "What is it that I want to achieve by stopping it?", "What is it, that really matters to me?"

Example

"I stop wasting time on social media." Why do I want this? "Because I want to spend that time on more important tasks".
→ Approach goal: "I live up to my priorities".

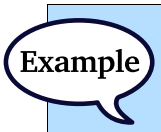
In many cases the first outcome is not very specific and hence needs further reflection.



"I live up to my priorities". What does that mean? To make it specific, I need a clear understanding of my priorities. For example: "I spend at least one hour per day reading papers on my PhD topic". Then reducing social media consumption becomes just a means to an end, namely to increase the time available for paper reading.

4. Behavioral vs. Outcome

Behavioral goals describe a desired behavior you want to live up to. They focus on the process rather than the end result.



- *I spend at least an hour a day on paper-reading.*
- *I stick to a well-balanced diet and work out at least once a week.*
- *I will work at least three times a week for at least two undisturbed hours.*

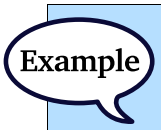
Advantages

+ The result is under your own control.
+ They can be broken into smaller sub-goals rather easily.
+ They are observable by others because people can see your behavior.

Disadvantages

– They do not give you direction with regard to the desired overall outcome.

Outcome goals describe a desired outcome or achievement. They stipulate the end result and leave the process open.



- *I stay up to date on current developments in my research area.*
- *I stay fit and healthy.*
- *Three months from now I will have submitted the paper to a reasonably high-ranked journal.*

Advantages

+ Specifying the desired outcome while leaving open how you approach the problem they increase your options.
+ They force you to decide what you really want to have achieved in the end.
+ They give you a clear direction and thus facilitate decision-making.

Disadvantages

– Your success might be influenced by external factors.

A Goal Without a Plan Is Just a Wish.

"Tout objectif sans plan n'est qu'un souhait." *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*

Goals and Sub-Goals

To achieve your goal you need further planning. Long-term goals should be divided into manageable short-term goals.

Example

Three months from now I will have submitted the paper to a reasonably high-ranked journal.

1. *I will have an outline of the paper and will have gotten my supervisor's approval for it (2 weeks form now).*
2. *I will have decided to which journal to submit the paper to (3 weeks form now).*
3. *. . .*

Outcome goals very often give you several options of behavioral sub-goals.

Example

Outcome goal: *I will have an outline of the paper and will have gotten my supervisor's approval for it (2 weeks form now):*

→ ***Behavioral goal, possibility #1:*** *For the next two weeks, I will spend at least two undisturbed hours per day working on my paper draft.*

→ ***Behavioral goal, possibility #2:*** *For the next two weeks, I will reserve Mondays and Wednesdays for doing nothing else but working on my paper draft.*

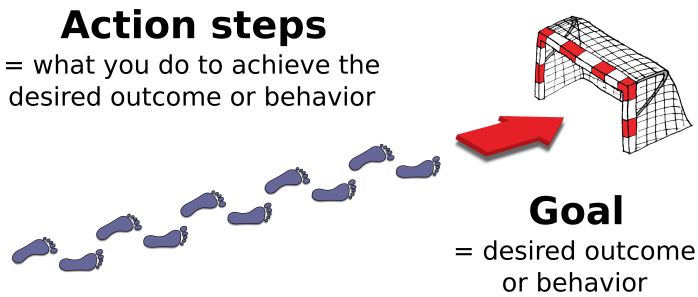
Goals and Action Plans

It is helpful to see the goal as the desired result, while the actions are what you do to achieve it. If your look at it this way, even a behavioral goal is the consequence of actions you take.

Example

If the (behavioral) goal is to read papers undisturbedly, some of the actions might be:

- *Shut off pop-up messages and the sound of your cell phone.*
- *Inform your colleagues (politely) that you dont't want to be disturbed.*
- *Go to the library / work at home.*
- *Use noise canceling headphones.*



Most goals can be achieved in various ways. You should always establish the goal first and then think about how to achieve it. When you start by thinking of how to solve a problem (that is thinking of actions to solve it) you very often limit yourself to your first idea. When you start by thinking about the desired outcome (that means thinking in terms of goals) it is much easier to come up with different ideas. Additionally, knowing your goal facilitates deciding what sequence of actions leads to the desired result in the most reliable or quickest way. Hence, thinking in terms of goals before considering the possible actions might be mind-broadening.

Example

An example from my own PhD in biophysics:
One of the reviewers of a paper I had submitted requested a Western Blot, which is a standard technique in biochemistry to detect specific proteins. The problem was: I neither knew how such a Western Blot is done exactly nor did our lab have the necessary equipment. My first though was: "Damn, I need to set up this method in our lab. That will likely take four to six months!". When I gave it some thought, I realized that the goal was not to perform the measurement *but* to have the results of the analysis. *It turned out to be a rather straight forward task to ask a friendly biochemistry lab to perform the measurement. I got the results within two weeks. Additionally, the cooperation partners became coauthors of the paper. This way I helped another PhD candidate to get a rather easy publication and I had another well-known professor on my paper, which certainly increased its impact.*