

The secret life of goals

How to set goals for yourself (and others) that propel you to new levels of accomplishment. By Jackie Sloane

Early in his career, Tom sold billboard space—not an ideal fit. He consistently found himself at about 30 percent of his quota, and even annual incentive trips to exotic locales had no impact on his productivity. One year, however, the reward for achieving his target was a trip to Hawaii. When Tom’s wife learned about this, the situation took an unexpected turn. Her brother lived in Hawaii, and his wife had just had a baby. The prospect of visiting them in such a fabulous place, all expenses paid, became very compelling to her—and therefore to Tom as well. Every day, she’d ask expectantly, “How’re we doing on our Hawaii trip?” Suddenly, meeting quota looked different to Tom, who loves his wife and wants to make her happy. He hit 125 percent of his quota that year, and the couple had a fantastic time in Hawaii.

Same marketplace and same person, yet entirely different results. What changed? The goal set for Tom by his firm became deeply meaningful for him once his wife was involved. He had an emotional investment in hitting his quota, so he began to focus on it intently with new energy and an enthusiastic support system, including an accountability partner whom he didn’t want to let down—an ideal formula for success.

This is one reason why executive coaching works. Smart, high-performing people who are ready to learn and to make a big change work toward an important goal with a seasoned accountability partner who believes in them and is committed to their success. The coach collaborates to uncover blind spots and gaps in thinking to identify obstacles and create strategies to address them, and to cultivate the relationships, abilities and resources to win.

Achieving meaningful goals is *thrilling*. Goals that never get much traction may not be meaningful or may have lost their meaning. As a leader who sets goals for both yourself and others, keep this in mind if you count on the success of others to reach achieve yours. When your people own a result on an emotional level, you might just see them work a little magic.



Here are nine key steps to take to make your goals work:

1. Create meaningful goals.

If you’ve been given a goal that doesn’t matter to you, ask yourself what would make it matter. Then renegotiate, starting with how your proposal serves the other party. If you want to engage the enthusiasm of others, ask yourself what really matters to them. If you manage a team and must get buy-in to succeed, ask your reports what they need to achieve the goal. Listen—and take care of it.

2. Clarify measures of success.

Be specific. How will you know you have achieved the result you seek? For example, “more effective” is not measurable.

3. Set realistic time frames.

SMART criteria instructs that goals be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound. Relevant, achievable goals are more apt to have meaning.

4. Chunk it down.

Break targets down into smaller, doable actions.

5. Identify obstacles.

Ask yourself and your team what will get in the way of progress. Create strategies to address those speed bumps.

6. Focus.

Budget regular time to act.


7. Engage others.

Significant goals involve others. Who can help to accelerate what you’re working on?

8. Create an accountability system.

Meager progress toward goals may result from your keeping everything in your head, instead of detailing and sharing your plan with others.

9. Celebrate successes.

Never underestimate the power of emotion. Celebrating milestones will motivate you and your team. 

JACKIE SLOANE is an executive coach who specializes in leadership and communication issues. She works with leaders to expand their ability to contribute through how they communicate, delegate, engage others and cultivate relationships.