

## **CLI Goal-Setting 201** By Tony Burgess

“We are kept from our goal not by obstacles but by a clear path to a lesser goal.” —Robert Brault

Most leaders believe that setting goals positively impacts performance. But, do we actually set goals? And do we leverage the science behind goal setting to do it well? This article reviews the key research on goal setting and invites you to put it into practice. Use the “7 Goal-Setting Questions (7GSQ)” at the end of the article to help you think deeper about your goals.

Imagine climbing up a ladder to the top of a very tall building and then discovering you climbed up the wrong building. We make sure our goals are taking us to the right destination by thoughtfully connecting them to our purpose. Think of purpose as an organization's bottom-line reason for being. Ask, “Why do we exist?” “What is the higher contribution that makes our team and our work so meaningful?”

**What is your organization’s purpose?** \_\_\_\_\_

Building on purpose, it is also important to clarify your envisioned future—a vivid picture of what an amazing future will look like for you and your organization.<sup>1</sup> Painting that picture puts your goals in context and helps make sure you are climbing up the right building.

### **How Exactly Do Goals Affect Performance?**

Edwin Locke and Gary Latham, the godfathers of goal-setting theory, report that setting goals affects performance in four key ways:<sup>2</sup>

1. Goals direct attention and effort toward goal-relevant activities and away from goal-irrelevant activities. Goals create focus. Without a goal, it is difficult to concentrate and avoid distractions.
2. Goals have an energizing function, increasing intensity of effort.
3. Goals affect persistence. Hard goals activate self-regulation and prolong effort.
4. Goals motivate people to discover or develop new strategies for accomplishing the task (e.g., learning new knowledge, activating their social network, and practicing creative thinking and complex problem solving).

<sup>1</sup> See the “CLI Envisioned Future Exercise” as one powerful way to envision your future:

<https://cornwallleadershipinstitute.com/resources/>

<sup>2</sup> [www.researchgate.net/publication/254734316\\_Building\\_a\\_Practically\\_Useful\\_Theory\\_of\\_Goal\\_Setting\\_and\\_Task\\_Motivation\\_A\\_35Year\\_Odyssey](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/254734316_Building_a_Practically_Useful_Theory_of_Goal_Setting_and_Task_Motivation_A_35Year_Odyssey)

## Your Top Three Goals

Before we go further, what are your top three work objectives for this year? Write them down. Doctor Gail Matthews, at Dominican University, has found that writing down your goals and sharing them with others significantly increases the likelihood that you will achieve your goals. Her research results are even stronger for people who also emailed a friend weekly updates on their progress.

GOAL #1: \_\_\_\_\_

GOAL #2: \_\_\_\_\_

GOAL #3: \_\_\_\_\_

## Are These Goals Effective?

What does the science behind goal-setting theory say? Returning to Locke and Latham's research, *specific* and *difficult* goals reliably increase performance.

**1. So, the goal needs to be specific.** Is your goal specific? In other words, is it clearly stated? For some goals, you can make it more specific by including a time deadline or putting numbers to it, making it measurable. Some goals defy measurement but can still be specific.

**2. The goal needs to be difficult.** Is your goal difficult? In other words, is it challenging? In order to accomplish it, you and your team will have to focus and work hard. The challenge of the goal is what catalyzes effort. The art is in finding the sweet spot that is challenging and, yet, not so challenging that it feels unattainable.

## Moderators

Locke and Latham found two factors that moderate goal achievement: commitment and feedback.

**1. Commitment:** How committed are you to your goal? Commitment manifests in two key ways: sense for the importance of the goal, and sense of self-efficacy to achieve the goal. Questions to ask yourself include: "How important is achieving this goal to me?" And, "Do I feel I have the capacity to achieve the goal?"

**2. Feedback:** How will you get the feedback you need along the way? "If [people] do not know how they are doing, it is difficult or impossible for them to adjust the level or direction of their effort or to adjust their performance strategies to match what the goal requires" (Locke & Latham). Part of effective goal setting includes developing a plan for feedback and accountability.

## **Autonomous Motivation**

In their research, Locke and Latham found that goals can be effective “whether the goals are assigned, self-set, or set participatively;” however, and this is crucial, people must be committed to the goal. Genuine commitment is crucial.

Edward Deci has spent his life researching human motivation. He has found that to achieve “optimal problem solving and performance, people need to be intrinsically motivated” (Deci, p. 73). “Self-motivation, rather than external motivation, is at the heart of creativity, responsibility, healthy behavior, and lasting change” (Deci, p. 9). He goes on to write:

At the heart of human freedom is the experience of choice...The main thing about meaningful choice is that it engenders willingness. It encourages people to fully endorse what they are doing; it pulls them into the activity and allows them to feel a greater sense of volition (Deci, p. 209, p. 34).

Margaret Wheatley puts it this way: "People own what they create: The only way to create ownership is to involve people in creating the project."

I think the same is true for the commitments people make when they develop their own goals, aligned with their larger purpose and vision. We don't need them to buy in because they already own it. They created it!

## **Closing Thoughts: Keep Purpose in Sight**

“It is the goals that we pursue that will shape and determine the kind of self we will become.” -Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Given the power that goals can have in our lives, it is important to thoughtfully consider the connection between our goals and our purpose—and who we are becoming.

Imagine that your year is over, and it went incredibly well. You and your team accomplished your most important goals. While visualizing those future results, ask yourself if your goals are aligned with your purpose, values, and envisioned future.

Will achieving your goals take you to where you want to be?

## “7GSQ” (The Seven Goal-Setting Questions)

**Goal:** \_\_\_\_\_

1. Is it specific *and* difficult...enough? Considerations: measurements and deadlines.

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2. Does it *really* matter to you? Considerations: Connection to purpose and how it contributes to your bigger vision, what it would mean to you to achieve it, etc.

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3. Are you capable of achieving it? Considerations: Seeking out new knowledge, skills, and people to help you succeed.

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4. What is your plan to receive feedback along the way? Considerations: Accountability partners, periodic updates, scorecards, leading indicators, etc.

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5. What could get in the way of achieving your goal, and how will you address this?

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6. Who will you share this with? How often will you provide progress updates to them?

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7. What are your next steps? What will you do and by when?

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