Smarter Goals

Setting Goals From the Heart

Two Kinds of Stuck

Some people have never been shown how to set a goal. Dreams stay foggy, effort scatters and the year slips by. If that is you, this handout will give you a clear, kind structure to start with.

Other people know exactly how to set goals and never seem to reach them. They write the plan, buy the planner and find themselves in the same place months later. If that is you, the problem is rarely the method. Often a part of you is standing in the way, and no framework will get past it until that part is heard. You will find more on this below.

Why Goals Help

A good goal turns a longing into a direction. Across decades of research, psychologists Edwin Locke and Gary Latham found that clear, challenging goals bring out more effort and better results than a vague intention to “do your best.” Management writer George Doran gave us SMART goals in 1981, and SMARTER adds two steps that keep a goal alive over time: Evaluate and Reevaluate.

	Major Term	Minor Terms
S	Specific	Significant, Stretching, Simple
M	Measurable	Meaningful, Motivational, Manageable
A	Attainable	Appropriate, Achievable, Agreed, Assignable, Actionable, Ambitious, Aligned, Aspirational, Acceptable, Action-focused
R	Relevant	Results-oriented, Realistic, Resourced, Resonant
T	Timely	Time-oriented, Time framed, Timed, Time-based, Timeboxed, Time-bound, Time-Specific, Timetabled, Time limited, Trackable, Tangible
E	Evaluate	Ethical, Excitable, Enjoyable, Engaging, Ecological
R	Reevaluate	Rewarded, Reassess, Revisit, Recordable, Rewarding, Reaching

Specific

A specific goal is clear enough to explain to a friend in one sentence. “Grow the business” is a hope. “Sign three new clients who light me up by June” gives your energy somewhere to go.

A specific goal will usually answer the five "W" questions:

- What: What do I want to accomplish?
- Why: Specific reasons, purpose or benefits of accomplishing the goal.
- Who: Who is involved?
- Where: Identify a location.

- Which: Identify requirements and constraints.

Measurable

Progress you can see keeps your heart in the game. Choose a measure that tells you, week by week, whether you are moving, and let it be something you can celebrate.

A measurable goal will usually answer questions such as:

- How much?
- How many?
- How will I know when it is accomplished?

Attainable

A good goal stretches you without breaking you. Challenging goals call up more effort than easy ones, as long as you believe they are possible and have what you need to reach them.

An attainable goal will usually answer the question:

- How: How can the goal be accomplished?

Plan for the moment it gets hard. In an analysis of 94 studies, people who made simple if-then plans were considerably more likely to follow through than people who only set the goal. For example: “If it’s 4 p.m. and I haven’t written yet, then I close my email and write for 20 minutes.”

Relevant

A relevant goal matters to you, and that matters more than it sounds. In studies by Kennon Sheldon and Andrew Elliot, people who pursued goals that expressed their own values and interests, instead of goals chosen out of pressure or guilt, kept up their effort longer, reached more of their goals and grew happier along the way.

A relevant goal can answer yes to these questions:

- Does this seem worthwhile?
- Is this the right time?
- Does this match our other efforts/needs?
- Are you the right person?
- Does my heart/body say yes?

Time-bound

A deadline turns someday into a date. Give your goal a time frame, then break it into steps you can take this season, this week and today.

A time-bound goal will usually answer the question:

- When?
- What can I do 6 months from now?
- What can I do 6 weeks from now?
- What can I do today?

Evaluate

Check in on a regular rhythm, weekly or monthly. Ask what is working and what is in the way, and write down what you find.

Reevaluate

Goals are tools, and tools get adjusted. If a goal no longer fits, change it without shame. Circumstances shift, and so do you.

Where Is This Goal Coming From?

Before you commit, ask where the goal was born. Some goals come from the head: what looks impressive, or what you think you should want. Others rise from the heart and from spirit, the deeper knowing of what your life is for. A goal can be specific, measurable, realistic and perfectly timed, and yet be wrong for you.

Having all the right goals won't matter if a part of you isn't in alignment with them, and that part may be carrying wisdom the head has missed. Before you push, pause and imagine reaching the goal. Does your body feel spacious and warm, or tight and heavy? Working with an IFS therapist or coach can help you listen more closely to that still small voice, the one that knows which goals are truly yours.

When a Part Gets in the Way

All of this works beautifully until a part of you decides it shouldn't. If you keep setting the same goal and missing it, the framework is fine. Something inside is protecting you from what reaching the goal might cost. Through the lens of Internal Family Systems, these are some of the parts that show up most often:

- **The saboteur,** who pulls the plug just as things start to work, because success once led somewhere that felt dangerous.
- **The insecure part,** who whispers that you are not enough and that everyone will soon find out.
- **The part afraid of failure,** who would rather procrastinate than try and fall short.
- **The perfectionist,** who won't let anything out the door until it can't be criticized.
- **The inner critic,** who treats every slip as proof you will never change, until giving up feels safer than trying.
- **The part afraid of success,** who knows that growth brings visibility, more responsibility or distance from people you love.
- **The exhausted part,** who has carried too much for too long and simply needs rest before it can move.

Pushing harder usually makes these parts dig in. Get curious instead. Ask the part what it is afraid would happen if you reached your goal, and listen with the same warmth you would offer a frightened friend. When a protective part feels understood, it often steps aside, and the energy it was spending on holding you back comes home to you.

Burdens You Inherited

Some of what gets in the way didn't start with you. Internal Family Systems calls these legacy burdens: beliefs and feelings handed down through families, cultures and history. A grandparent who lived through the Depression may have passed on the conviction that there is never enough. Parents who worked themselves into the

ground may have taught that rest must be earned. A family that was punished for standing out may have taught, without words, that it is safer to stay small, and a culture may have told you that people like you don't lead. Legacy burdens can be released, and when they are, many people find their ancestors' strength coming through to them, freed of the fear that came with it.

Energies That Aren't Yours

Sometimes what pulls at you doesn't feel like a part of you at all: a heaviness, an urge or a voice that seems to come from outside you. Many spiritual traditions recognize energies that attach to us without belonging to us, and IFS calls them unattached burdens. In my Neoshamanic IFS work, these can be gently identified and sent on their way, and goals that once felt impossible often begin to move.

Goals and Something Bigger

Goals have seasons, and the living world can teach you their rhythm. A gardener plants bulbs in autumn and trusts the cold to do its part before spring. A bear spends the fall preparing and then sleeps the winter through, and no one calls it lazy. Water wears a groove in stone one drop at a time. Call on an ancestor who planned a harvest or a voyage, and ask how they held a long goal through hard weather. Picture the future you who has already reached this goal, and ask what they would have you do this week. Then leave room for the Great Mystery to bring what you could never have planned.

Questions for Reflection

- Which goal have I set more than once without reaching it?
- What part of me might be afraid of what reaching it would bring?
- Whose goal is this, really: mine, or someone else's?
- What would make this goal a joy to pursue?

When Goals Go Wrong

Goals are powerful medicine, and medicine has side effects. Business school researchers have documented how narrow, high-pressure goals can crowd out everything the goal doesn't measure, push people toward reckless risk and even invite cheating. In a famous case, Ford's rush to build a car under 2,000 pounds and under $2,000 led to a fuel tank design that cost lives. Pair every goal with the values it must never violate.

Calling on Support

Goals grow stronger in good company. A review of 138 studies with nearly 20,000 people found that tracking your progress makes you more likely to reach a goal, and the effect grows when you write your progress down or share it with others. Tell a friend or a coach what you are working toward, and report in.

When We Work Together

If you know how to set goals and keep finding yourself stuck, that is exactly where coaching helps. Together we get to know the parts that stall or overdrive you, so your goals can come from Self and your heart can lead the way to them.

Free Resources

- *American Psychological Association, “Frequently monitoring progress toward goals increases chance of success”: apa.org/news/press/releases/2015/10/progress-goals*
- *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge, “When Goal Setting Goes Bad”: library.hbs.edu/working-knowledge/when-goal-setting-goes-bad*
- *Related handouts: The Art of Accomplishment and Leading From the Heart.*

Influences and Credits

- *SMART goals: George T. Doran (1981). Goal-setting theory: Edwin Locke and Gary Latham.*
- *Research: Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran (2006) on if-then plans; Kennon Sheldon and Andrew Elliot (1999) on goals that fit your values; Lisa Ordóñez and colleagues (2009) on the side effects of goals.*
- *Research on support: Benjamin Harkin and colleagues (2016) on monitoring goal progress.*
- *Parts and Self come from Internal Family Systems, developed by Dr. Richard Schwartz. Calling on the support of the living world and the unseen comes from Neoshamanic IFS (NIFS), the approach I practice and teach.*