

Why do some people outperform others?

BY CANDY TYMSON CSP

I was recently reminded (yet again) just how effective setting goals are. My husband Jeremy and I sat down to work out a plan of where we wanted to be and what we wanted to be doing by 2010. Within six months we had achieved more than half of it!

SMART goals have been around for many years. SMART is an acronym for S: Specific & Stretching; M: Measurable; A: Attractive; R: Realistic and T: Time-Framed (depending on which management book you are using—some of the letters may stand for slightly different things). There is no doubt that this formula is a good one for setting goals. But how do you stay motivated to achieve the goals once they have been 'smarted'? What type of goals generates the best results?

Creating Goals That Motivate

We all have goals and yet so many people give up on their goals, or fall well short of the mark, so I was interested to read research undertaken by industrial/organisational psychologist, Edwin Locke who has come up with 14 Key Findings as to what goals need in order to work.

(Locke's study was based on 40,000 subjects, ranging from children to research scientists, in eight countries, in both laboratory and field settings, more than 88 different tasks, time spans of 1 minute to several years...very credible research!)

Some Key Findings

Here are 5 of the 14 findings—some of which won't surprise you:

- Difficult goals lead to greater achievement
- Specific and difficult goals lead to higher performance
- Commitment to goals is most critical when they are specific and difficult
- High commitment to goals is attained when the individual sees it as important and obtainable
- Goal setting is most effective when there is feedback showing progress

Difficult Goals Motivate

I remember when I was the Lady Mayoress of Sydney and decided to get together a committee of some of Sydney's leading personalities to raise \$250,000 for charity. Well the \$250,000 was my goal—but it wasn't big enough for the group; it just didn't excite them, until one of them said: "Let's raise \$1million in one night". Suddenly everyone was motivated and started brainstorming how it could be done. The more difficult goal gave us all a greater sense of challenge and we were excited by how big the goal was.

The goal was also very specific—\$1 million in one night. This enabled the group to have a clear focus, and they developed a formula that everyone believed would achieve the result. Another interesting dynamic happened—everyone wanted to be part of the group that achieved this goal. Because it was difficult and specific, a high level of commitment existed in the committee to get the result.

Getting Commitment

According to Locke's findings, high commitment to goals is attained when two things occur. Firstly, the individual must be convinced that the goal is important; and secondly, they are convinced it is obtainable (or at least progress can be made towards it). In organisations, commitment can be enhanced by effective leadership where the leader provides an inspiring vision—and is seen as a role model in working towards achieving the goal.



Leadership Techniques to Obtain Commitment

- Provide & communicate an inspiring vision
- Act as a role model
- Expect outstanding performance—express genuine confidence
- Delegate responsibility for key tasks
- Enhance capabilities through training
- Ask for commitment in public

(Source: Locke & Associates 1991)

Importance of Ongoing Feedback

When we undertook to raise \$1m in one night we recognised the importance of having ongoing feedback during the six month planning stage. The group met and reported progress fortnightly; members who were not meeting their commitments were supported and encouraged, and sometimes tasks were reallocated; we shared and celebrated our successes along the way; and by announcing our goal publicly we received consistent feedback from outside influences too.

Making It Manageable & Achievable

When I discovered the concept of 'chunking' (that is breaking a large project down into small, manageable pieces) my approach to goals changed dramatically. When the task is a big one, it can often be seen as overwhelming and therefore you just don't start it. A good example is when we moved house. Not only were we buying and selling properties, we also had to decide what to do with all the things we no longer needed, including the 15 cartons the kids had left behind when they moved out, and fifteen years of earnest hoarding. We approached it one drawer at a time, one box at a time, one room at a time. This was manageable and very rewarding as each chunk was a milestone in itself and we felt a sense of achievement as we completed each small task—towards the larger goal of sorting out the whole house.

SMART goals really work. In hindsight our goal to 'raise \$1million dollars in one night' was very SMART—and of course, we achieve it!

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