

Achieving Goals

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Setting goals is a complex process that, when done quickly, means you may overlook or omit important factors that can make the difference between success or failure. Would you ever go to the movie theater without checking to see what is playing or checking the show times? Of course not! Most of us start by checking our local theaters for a movie our friends have recommended, or by reading reviews of the various movie choices. Should it be a romantic comedy, an action thriller or a documentary? We may have to negotiate with a friend or loved one about the final choice. We note the show times, taking into consideration the cost of movie tickets, and the likelihood of finding parking near the theater. Finally, after all of that, we make the best choice and we go! Broken down like this, it seems like a complicated process!

So rather than getting bogged down in reviewing resolutions of the past that were never realized, let's focus upon trying something different, creating a plan for success.

The complex process of goal-setting should be carefully done or else you'll end up with a long list of unrealized "projects" that never got off the ground.

Have you ever expressed a desire to achieve a particular goal, but skipped establishing the list of steps necessary to achieve that goal? The typical end-result is that very little happens after the initial impulse. As we move into a new year, many of us celebrate or mark this special date by establishing a goal or resolutions for ourselves. These resolutions can mark the jumping-off point to achieving a change for the better. So rather than getting bogged down in reviewing resolutions of the past that were never realized, let's focus upon trying something different, creating a plan for success.

Here are some of the key elements to successfully achieving our goals.

First, you have to be clear about what is important to you as it relates to your values. Let's say that your goals are to be a loving spouse, an attentive parent, and a financial success. If you sacrifice time with family in favor of working long hours for that promotion, it might indicate that financial stability and success are what you value most. If you are unclear about your values, it will be hard to maintain the energy and commitment necessary to realizing your goals. Keep in mind that some values may change as you go through life, while others are absolute. You may always be committed to living a healthy lifestyle or being involved in your faith community, but other goals might evolve as you do. A young, single person may be focused on career development, saving for the future, or meeting a potential spouse. A married middle-aged person with children is probably saving for future school expenses, retirement, or home improvements. While an older person may be more focused upon their retirement plans, long-term care expenses, or saving for travel.

As you establish your goals, it is important to ask yourself questions such as, "Is this goal consistent, or aligned, with my values? How will I benefit from achieving these goals? Does this goal conflict with any of my other goals?" The answers to these questions can help you to clarify which goals you'd like to focus upon first and which goals may not be high priority.

Once selected, get **SMART** about achieving your goals.

Specific. What exactly do you wish to accomplish? Instead of saying something vague like, "I want to get healthy," a more specific goal is, "I want to be able to walk three miles at a time" or "I want to run a marathon next year." The more specific you are in identifying the goal, the easier it will be to establish the steps that lead up to accomplishing that goal. These examples relate to the topic of health, but keep in mind that goals can involve anything from career to family, finances, education, material possessions or even spiritual growth.

Masurable. It's easier to see how well you're doing if you establish specific milestones toward your ultimate goal. If the goal is to be able to walk three miles, then you'll need to set up an exercise schedule that lays out precisely what you will need to do on a daily, weekly and a monthly basis. These milestones are what let you know if you're on the right track, or if you need to make adjustments to your ambitious plan. Just remember to be kind to yourself. Don't give up! If you are not able to maintain the original schedule, step back, reassess, and recommit. If by week four, you are supposed to be walking at least a mile (eight blocks) and you're already up to 10 or 12 blocks, you'll know that you're not only doing well but exceeding the target markers that show your progress.

Achievable. Be realistic. If your goal is to own a mansion in a year, but you don't have a job, it is pretty unlikely that you will be able to pull it off! It may not be realistic to run a marathon as an initial goal, but running a five or ten-kilometer race may be a better place to start. Try not to make things too easy though. We're looking at goals that require a fair amount of effort and time, in order to achieve them.

Relevant. Does the goal you've set align with your long-term goals? Is this the right time for this goal? If you've got three small children and a busy spouse, disappearing for hours to train for a marathon may not work with your desire to be a good spouse and a great parent. Make sure to ask yourself, "How will achieving this goal move me toward my long-term goals?"

Timely. What is the target date for achieving your goal? Without a deadline, it is hard to remain motivated. Saying I am going to run a marathon in 11 months is completely different from saying, "I am going to run a marathon." The first is clear and specific, and the second is fairly meaningless!

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Once you've established a goal that is in line with your values and applied the SMART planning steps, keep in mind the additional tips:

- **Don't make excuses and don't blame other people, if things don't go well.** Everyone has an excuse, and no one really wants to hear yours! Blaming others for how things are going, means denying yourself the honest assessment of what is working and what is not. You can gain valuable knowledge from that assessment. Own up to your mistakes, recognize and acknowledge praise, reward yourself for successes and learn from your failures.
- **Stay in motion and keep moving! Don't get sidetracked,**

discouraged or distracted. It is hard to stop a moving object; similarly, it is equally difficult to get a plan in motion again once you have stopped!

- **Expect the difficult times and accept them.** Don't ignore them. They are there to let you know that you are learning and growing. Most of the things in life that are worth having, have a price. Your goals cost your time, commitment, and effort. That is just the way it is, and it will not be helpful to dwell on or complain about it.
- **Share your goals with people who will help you achieve them.** Have you ever had the experience of telling someone about a goal, and gotten a negative response like, "Oh, you'll

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never be able to do that!" or "Why would you want to do that?" Avoid being discouraged, and if you need help, make sure to ask for help from people you know, trust, and respect.

- **Avoid making the Big Announcement to All about your goals.** Research has shown that when you make a big pronouncement about a goal you'd like to achieve, you're less likely to be successful than folks who either notify only a small group of helpful supporters, or keep their goals to themselves. It turns out that when people share their goals too widely, they feel as if they have done something – when, in fact they have not, and forward progress stops!

With these tips and suggestions, you'll be able to create a plan of action that you'll be able to stick with. Remember that if you do get stuck, that your Employee/Member Assistance Program is available to offer support and creative suggestions for you and your goals!

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For free and confidential support and resources call the Employee/Member/Student/Family Assistance Program (800) 292-2780 www.ers-eap.com