

# Smarter Goal Setting

By [Steven Shrago](#)

*"If you don't know where you are heading to, any path will take you there."*

There is little doubt that goal setting - or more precisely the motivation to attain goals - has proven performance benefits. A meta analysis of a number of studies looking at goal setting in the sports and exercise areas showed that 78% of all studies demonstrated a moderate to strong performance improvement effect<sup>1</sup>.

So that's good.

And let's face it, actually setting quality goals isn't really very difficult. There are a number of subtle variations, but the SMART model serves well for the vast majority of cases. In short the SMART model provides a set of criteria against which to test the quality of set goals:

**S - Specific:** "I want to be able to see my six pack" vs "I want to be thinner"

**M - Measurable:** How will you know you have achieved the goal? What criteria will you use for ongoing feedback and progress assessment?

**A - Agreed/Accountable:** Who will hold you to account for achieving this goal? Do they agree this is a worthy goal?

**R - Realistic/Relevant:** Is what you are proposing actually possible? Is it something that gets you towards a higher goal?

**T - Time bound:** When do you intent to complete the goal?

Get your goals looking SMART and you are a long way down the track to improved

performance, right?

Apparently not.

Every year during the 'resolution revolution' millions of people set themselves goals and targets for the year. And most are all but forgotten by the end of January.

Then you have we exercise junkies, with our detailed knowledge of training regimes and methodologies, with our lofty goals of double and triple body weight deadlifts, sub-3 minute Fran times and so on. Do we fair any better? A little, but there is still room for improvement.

## **Big goals**

As a psychologist I am uniquely qualified to make the following assertion:

"People are complicated."

All of our conscious behaviour (and a sizeable chunk of our unconscious behaviour) is motivated, i.e. it serves a purpose. For example we eat (behaviour) when we are hungry (motivation). We bark (behaviour) when we want to go into the back garden and chase cats (motivation). Well my dog does, anyway.

The tricky bit is that we have moved on a little from our time with the rest of our apes; not all of our motives are as clearly linked to obvious needs as they used to be.

Somehow, over the course of the years we have become a little more coy about our motivations and desires, wrapping a layer of 'social acceptability' (what is/is not acceptable) around them. On top of that we wrap another layer of 'self image' (how do I want to come across?). Then perhaps a layer of 'knowledge' (do I understand how to achieve what I want?) on top of that. Finally a layer of 'skill' (have I the capability to get what I want?) wraps around everything. Just like an onion, if you like.

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<sup>1</sup> Singer, R, Hausenblas, H, & Janelle, C (Eds), Handbook of Sport Psychology, Wiley, New York, 2001

So when we see a certain sort of behaviour in action what we are actually viewing is: Someone using a level of skill, based on their knowledge, based on how they want to come across, based on what they deem socially acceptable in order to get what they want.

Complicated and a little indirect, no? Tricky to make the link between the behaviour and underlying motive, isn't it?

Put simply: goals that help you achieve what you really, really want (your inner motives) are much more likely to be achieved. Because when you boil it down, the difference between successful goals and unsuccessful goals is the degree to which you make the effort to achieve them. And effort towards achieving your Big Goals comes more easily.

What does this mean for your training? Simple: ask yourself in the most honest terms "What do I train for?"

Got an answer? Good.

Now ask your yourself "Why?"

Another answer? Excellent. Ask yourself "Why?", again. In fact do it a few more times to see if you can get to the real core of things.

Your conversation may go a little something like this:

Why do I train? I want to get stronger.

Why (do I want to get stronger)? To be more capable in the real world.

Why (do I want to be more capable...)? To be able to look after or protect my family.

Why (do I want to look after/protect...)? To be thought of as dependable.

Why (do I want to be thought of as dependable)? To maintain my self esteem.

To be fair, not everyone's internal conversation will look like or even end up like this (people

are complicated, remember?). A little drilling down can be quite revealing, though.

What you should be left with at the end of this enquiry is an example of a Big Goal: a motivation that drives lots of other behaviours and sits closer to the core of your 'onion'. This Big Goal acts like a magnet for behaviour and energy. Simply put, Little Goals aligned with this Big Goal will maintain your motivation over a longer period of time.

Now consider your current training goals. Do they really align with this Big Goal?

Take the example above: if self esteem and a sense of general capability/dependability are at the core of your world, the perhaps a training regime based around narrow skill development may not get you there. Subsequently, it may be hard to stay focused on this. However picking drills and programming activities that develop a broad, inclusive fitness - with observable results - may be more along your path.

When the going gets tough, keep this Big Goal in mind - it is the reason that you train, after all!

## **Little Goals**

The Big Goal can almost be considered an aspiration; something that we really want, but can't actually reach from where we currently are.

So in order to get to it, we need to set a series of Little Goals to help us along the pathway. This is where most people start, generally without sight of the Big Goal in the first place...

Setting little goals is pretty straightforward, as I mentioned above.

So consider this: are you setting 'input' or 'output' goals? That is, are your targets based around achieving a specific outcome (output goals), or about the process or 'how' of the activity you are undertaking (input goals)?

Consider this example:

"I want to be able to complete 50 consecutive kipping pull-ups by the end of March this year."

*versus*

"I will maintain my focus on keeping a strict body position during my kipping swing (hollow to 'C' shape) for every swing."

Both of these goals will help to achieve the greater goal of enhancing the kipping pull-up. One focuses on the output, while the other focuses on the input or process.

The disadvantage of the former is that in many cases it is actually out of your direct control. Failure to achieve an output goal can be pretty demotivational.

Input goals however, are something of a win-win; so long as you have picked a performance enhancing input, achieving these goals is always under your direct control. Which gives you a better chance of achieving them. Which is motivational!

Performance goals are particularly beneficial in competitive situations; they serve to provide a real focus for 'game day' activity, and reduce performance anxiety by lessening the emphasis on the consequences of the outcome.

By all means set yourself some output goals for the purpose of benchmarking. But I would recommend making your day-to-day training goals more about process and inputs.

### **Goal setting, over-confidence and motivation**

Consider this classic strategy used in interrogation situations where the interviewers are attempting to break the will of the detainee: the interviewer makes a request of the individual and then verbally berates them for failing to provide an acceptable answer. Repeated enough times, this reinforces the message to the individual that no matter what they do, it will never be good enough. Confidence falters and the will to resist soon follows.

Now consider the lifter in the gym who openly shouts and chastises himself after failing to make a lift. Or fails to PR that day. And so on.

The idea of setting an 'impossible' goal seems seductive at first: "It will force me to be more creative about my methods", "If I set a challenging goal, it will drive my performance to even higher levels" are amongst the numerous excuses given.

Men are particularly susceptible to this thinking trap.

However, try as you might, you cannot escape the limitations of your own physiology. And each time you fail to achieve this unrealistic standard, your confidence erodes a little. And your will to continue starts to wane...

You see achieving goals is good for the confidence and self-esteem. Attained goals speak of progress, achievement, overcoming challenges and loads of other good stuff. Confidence breeds more confidence, which in turn allows you to push yourself a little harder. Which will boost your performance.

Make your goals realistic, relevant and attainable. Make them small enough to remain achievable, but still aligned with your larger Big Goals and overall purpose to remain motivational. Keep your main focus on the input or process goals, and track your progress as you go.

Oh yes. Make sure your goals are SMART.

*Steven Shrago is London-based psychologist/management consultant, and co-owner of CrossFit London. He is considering the idea of changing his annual "lose weight" goal to something SMARTer. [Click here](#) for his bio.*