

# Effective Goal Setting

A Short Guide On How to Define Your Goals, Set a System to Accomplish  
Them, and Achieve Extraordinary Results

By Roberto Zoia

Effective Goal Setting. A Short Guide On How to Define Your Goals, Set a System to Accomplish Them, and Achieve Extraordinary Results

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*To Natalia, Lara, and Giacomo. To my parents.*

# Introduction

"Any job that can be measured by productivity is a job humans should not be doing. Productivity is for robots"

– Kevin Kelly, co-founder of *Wired Magazine*<sup>1</sup>

Nobody but productivity nerds would buy a book about productivity. Accomplishing ambitious goals, however, is something most people resonate with. This book is not about productivity. It's about being clear about what you want and how to achieve it. The thing is, to accomplish your goals you'll need a system, and that's where this guide fits in.

This book doesn't pretend to be a comprehensive treaty about goal setting. I'm not saying that the system this book proposes is the only system that works, or that it's the best system there is –far from it. But it's a methodology built by learning from people I admire, and adapting parts of the methods they propose, either directly or from books I've read. It works surprisingly well for me, I hope it will work as well for you.

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<sup>1</sup> Twitted by Kevin Kelly ([@kevin2kelly](https://twitter.com/kevin2kelly)).

# Successful People Don't Get Results by Accident

'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'  
'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.  
'I don't much care where—' said Alice.  
'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.

— *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll

Successful people and over-achievers don't get results by accident. While luck has its part in success, they don't wait for luck to happen. They are deliberate in what they do and open to new paths. Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) did not create one of the largest empires of the ancient world by the age of thirty by accident. [Michael Phelps](#) didn't win 23 Olympic gold medals by improvising. We can choose to believe the myth that people are born with a magical combination of DNA, connections, and lucky breaks that conspire to determine what we can accomplish in life. Or we can confront the reality that there is a wide-open path for all of us, if we choose to do something about it<sup>2</sup>.

Goals give us a clear picture of what we want to accomplish. They give us direction and focus. They help us discriminate goal-relevant activities from less important things. Goals don't let us lie to ourselves into thinking you are making progress just because we have no time for anything and end up our days exhausted.

Not everybody is fond of goals, however. In [The Focus Course](#), Shawn Blanc says that taken to the extreme, people fall in one of two groups. One group considers setting goals essential to accomplish anything worth. The other group favors living in the moment and focus on quality.

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<sup>2</sup> cfr Godin, Seth. *Pick Four*.

For this group progress is a consequence of having a commitment to excellence in all aspects of live.

You need a mix of both approaches. Living in the moment is about quality of life. But as important as this is, you don't want to live just any moment but the "right moment"; the moment that will bring you closer to where you want to be. Peter Drucker summarizes by saying that *efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right things*<sup>3</sup>.

## Make Goals Explicit

We can do *anything* we want, but we can't do *everything* we want. At least one critical resource, *time*, is limited. You need to decide which goals are worth your time and efforts, and postpone or just discard the others.

Some things to keep in mind about goals:

*Goals need to be explicit.* If your goals are too vague or generic, they won't be useful or lead to action. "Growing my business" is too broad to be useful as a goal. If you don't narrow down what you mean by growing the business, you'll end up chasing day-to-day problems, or the shiniest idea that promises great returns. A more specific goal would be, for example, "Grow my business by achieving a 30% profit increase in our current markets by the end of the year". Better yet, "...by focusing on X and Y products, and increasing service level by 20%." Clear goals help discriminate in your day-to-day actions what's important from what's not.

*Understanding why* you want to accomplish something is essential to find motivation. When thinking something you want to accomplish, ask yourself: What's in this for me?

*Your goals must match who you want to be.* As James Clear puts it, "your actions need to be aligned with your values, identity, and deepest beliefs in order for your actions to remain consistent over time and to achieve long-term goals."

*You need a process for setting your goals.* You could rely on your intuition, but having a process will produce substantially better results. By defining your goals you are defining where you are headed. If you set your destination wrong, it won't matter how much effort you put in every day. St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AC) wrote centuries ago: *bene curris, sed extra viam*. You run well, but out of the path.

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<sup>3</sup> cfr Drucker, Peter F. *Principles of Management*.

Finally, *defining your goals is just the beginning of the journey*. Marshall Goldsmith says that we are superior planners, and inferior doers. Setting your goals is important, but you still need to reach your destination.

## Not All Goals Are Created Equal

When defining your goals, you need to be clear about what the goals are for, and what control you have over them.

Someone who works as a freelancer has more flexibility over her schedule than an employee who works 9 to 5 for a company. While the freelancer has clients and no boss to report, defining her goals is totally up to her.

A manager working for a company or organization may have personal goals. But she also has *work related goals*, objectives that she is expected to achieve because of her job in the company. Depending on the company's culture, and her boss style of leadership, these goals may be explicitly defined or not. These work goals are "personal" in the sense that it's her responsibility to make them happen, but in the end, she is advancing the company's objectives. She may learn and grow in the process, which always help with motivation by making the job attractive, but she is not working towards those goals because of the learning and growth per se.

Things can get more complicated. If she has people reporting to her, she's expected to rely on her team to accomplish her work goals. That's one of the reasons why she has been given reports in the first place.

An entrepreneur has a very different mindset and expectations than both the freelancer and the company manager.

The ability to take things from idea to reality, to make things happen, is critical. There is no silver bullet for doing this. In order to be a 10x or 100x performer at what you do, you need to get 10x or 100x more value out of the limited time you have. You need to make sure you are working on the things that have the highest impact on what you want to achieve, in the most efficient way possible. That's why prioritizing, which is giving things the proper level of importance, is such a valuable skill.

Very few people do this without some kind of framework, implicit or explicitly defined, that helps them work towards what they judge important. When following the process proposed below, at first you'll need to adapt and it won't come naturally to you. But as your skills and habits in goal-setting get better, it will become second nature to you. Without thinking, you'll structure your day around the things that have more impact in making progress towards your goals.

# A Process for Setting Your Goals

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for goal setting. The process described below is meant as a guide. Adapt it to suit your own process. However, I would recommend to follow the process as-is at least one time.

## Step 1. List your goals

Make a list of goals. Include everything you would maybe like to accomplish. Don't spend time thinking how you'll accomplish these goals right now. There will be time for this later.

It doesn't matter if you use a spreadsheet on your laptop or a paper notebook. Use whatever suits you best. Don't limit yourself by your past experience, by what others may think, by the resources needed to accomplish something. Don't over-analyze things.

Our best ideas usually don't occur to us the first time we think about something. Walk away from your list for a day or at least for some hours. Our brain needs time to connect the dots. Then come back and finish it.

## Step 2. Classify your goals

### a. Balance

Looking at your goals and their balance in different areas of your life will help you see where your priorities are. If you want to focus on work-related goals only because that's where you want to maximize your progress, just be aware that other aspects of your life will suffer as a consequence.

For simplicity<sup>4</sup>, we will stick to the seven aspects Zig Ziglar proposes: *Career, Spiritual, Family, Financial, Mental, Physical, and Social*. Go through your list and classify each goal accordingly.

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<sup>4</sup> There are other classifications you can use. Pick the one that suits you better and stick to it, at least until you have a strong motive to change. See, for example, Steven Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*; or Gary Keller's *The ONE Thing*; also, Shawn Blanc, [The Focus Course](#).

## b. Big Goals vs. Small Goals

Don't settle for small. Aim to be the best person you can be. Extraordinary results come from aiming high and stepping out of our comfort zone. "Highly successful people choose to live at the outer limits of achievement. They not only dream of but deeply crave what is beyond their natural grasp<sup>5</sup>".

Not all your goals need to be big goals that stretch yourself to the limit. But some of them should be. If you just settle for small, this exercise isn't worth the time and you'll be better off just doing every day what your guts tell you.

Big, ambitious goals require, of course, more effort. "The real challenge is not determining if you want the result, but if you are willing to accept the sacrifices required to achieve your goal. Do you want the lifestyle that comes with your quest? Do you want the boring and ugly process that comes before the exciting and glamorous outcome?"<sup>6</sup>

Go through your list and classify each goal as big or small.

## c. Broad Goals vs. Specific Goals

Your goals need to be specific. Broad, open questions are great for brainstorming, but if you want specific success, you need specific goals. Otherwise, you'll end up with a declaration of good intentions.

Part of being specific is establishing a timeframe for achieving your goal. Taylor Pearson, author of *The End of Jobs*, says that the number one mistake that keeps people from reaching their goals is not setting deadlines.

You must also define how will you measure progress. What does success look like for this goal?

Go through your list and check that your goals are specific enough. How will you know when you have reached your goal? What is your time frame? Is the goal clearly defined? But don't settle for small.

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<sup>5</sup> Keller, Gary. *The One Thing: The surprisingly simple truth behind extraordinary results*. p. 167.

<sup>6</sup> Clear, James, [Goal Setting: A Scientific Guide to Setting and Achieving Goals](#).

### Step 3. Pick Your Goals

In this part of the process, you should decide which goals will you work on and which will you discard.

Check your list and pick the goals you want to focus on. Some should be long-term goals, the other can be short-term. For your work-related goals, if it's the case, you should validate them with your boss, just to make sure your goals are aligned with your boss' priorities.

How many goals should you keep? Some authors recommend four goals. Other authors recommend one goal for each aspect of your life. I don't have a magical number to recommend. The exact number will depend mostly on your personal situation.

In her book *Grit. The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, Angela Duckworth tells us about Warren Buffett's three-step process for prioritizing his goals:

“The story goes like this: Buffett turns to his faithful pilot and says that he must have dreams greater than flying Buffett around to where he needs to go. The pilot confesses that, yes, he does. And then Buffett takes him through three steps.

“First, you write down a list of twenty-five career goals.

“Second, you do some soul-searching and circle the five highest-priority goals. Just five.

“Third, you take a good hard look at the twenty goals you didn't circle. *These you avoid at all costs. They're what distract you; they eat away time and energy, taking your eye from the goals that matter more.*”

Keep in mind that "one of the greatest barriers to achieving your goals is the other goals you have. In other words, your goals are competing with one another for your time and attention."<sup>7</sup> We can't do everything at once. We don't like to face it, but every choice has a cost.

Complexity is another factor to keep in mind. Depending on their goals, some people find it useful to start focusing on one goal for a period of time –for example, two months– and when you have acquired the habits and practices needed for reaching that goal, start working in parallel on a second goal for 60 days, and so on.

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<sup>7</sup> Clear, James. [Goal Setting: A Scientific Guide to Setting and Achieving Goals](#).

## Refining Your Goals

Now that you have established your goals, you'll make a 'profile' for each goal. This profile will be useful as a reference you can come back when you review your goals and actions.

For this step we will borrow from Zig Ziglar's [The Seven Steps of Goal Setting](#), and from the adaptation done by Seth Godin in *Pick Four*<sup>8</sup>. For each of your goals, answer the following questions.

**Benefits from reaching this goal. What's in it for me?** To accomplish your goal, you'll need to be strongly motivated so that you don't stop when the initial enthusiasm vanishes. (It usually does.)

Don't settle with the first answer that comes to mind. Remember that *people don't want to buy a quarter-inch drill, they want a quarter-inch hole*<sup>9</sup>. For example, money is rarely a goal by itself and is a poor long-term motive for doing things. The real question is *what do you want the money for?*

**Obstacles to overcome.** You can't possibly know all the obstacle you will face while working to achieve your goals. But you can prepare yourself to overcome the ones you can anticipate. If there were no obstacles to your goal, anyone would do it.

Make a list of all the things that can prevent you from being successful.

**Skills and knowledge required.** Don't think only in skills you personally need or knowledge you have. Maybe you need skills you can outsource, or knowledge someone else has.

**People and groups to work with.** List people expecting the outcome of this goal. List people who will measure your results.

List people that you need to help you to accomplish this goal. They may be people you know directly, people in your network, or people you'll need to reach out.

**Plan for reaching this goal.** Think through the details of completing your goal. Write it out, like a story.

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<sup>8</sup> You can find a summary of Zig Ziglar's original steps following this [link](#).

<sup>9</sup> Quote attributed to Harvard Business School's economist and professor [Theodore Levitt](#).

Did you enjoy reading the sample chapter from *Effective Goal Setting*? You can [buy the book on Amazon](#) and download the FREE companion templates.

