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Goal Setting

I am sure that everyone knows someone who has made a New Year's resolution – it may even be themselves! I also suspect that most are familiar with the statistics relating to success – Forbes suggests that only one in four are still on track with their goal at the start of February, and that under 10% accomplish their wish.

Why is it that going to the gym twice a week, reading one book a month, or leaving work on time seems so appealing and attainable on 1st January and yet, for many, is nigh on impossible four weeks later? Why do we find it so hard to deliver the dream? In some instances, the goal may have been unrealistic, and defeat has become an inevitability consequence; however, for others, the inertia is often due to the lack of focus, accountability, and emotional attachment.

Having a method around goal setting and reviewing can help. The SMART methodology was first described by John Doran and over the years has been adapted in several ways; for example, Realistic is sometimes replaced with Relevant and more recently the acronym has been extended to SMARTER with the additional letters promoting the themes of Evaluation and Re-Adjustment.

Building on this, I use the mnemonic SMARTIES, that incorporates a couple of themes that can be important.

Let's work through an example:

'I want to be healthier' is not an uncommon goal – in fact, I am not sure there are many who would veer away from this wish. Unfortunately, it is so vague, the words become meaningless; the statement needs to be qualified.

The qualifying questions start by homing in and creating some meaning:

Specific – What does being healthier mean to that person? Is it losing weight? Exercising more? Reducing absence from work? Without clarity, any progress made will be arrived at through chance rather than judgement.

Measurable – If the goal is losing weight – how much? Exercise more often – how often? Reduce sickness absence – to what?

Adaptable – Sometimes progress is better or quicker than expected, whilst at other times it can be tougher. There is no harm in adjusting the goal posts and resetting the vision, especially if the other option is to give up. For example, if you have suffered an injury how will you adapt your goal of exercising more?

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Realistic – Being healthier is a realistic goal for most. Running 100 metres in under 10 seconds is within the capabilities of only a few. The goal must be in line with reality!

Timebound – Clarity around when the goal will be achieved is required to avoid drift and create motivation. E.g. when will the weight be lost by?

Inspected – When and how are you going to pause and see how you are progressing and who else can provide help in keeping you accountable. E.g. I will weigh myself every two weeks, reveal the result to a friend and set a new fortnightly goal.

Ego – How much has the goal come from within as opposed to being forced upon you? I often ask people to provide a score out of ten that indicates how important the outcome is to them. If the score is less than eight, then failure or disengagement will be on the horizon. The next step must be in creating the emotional attachment that will anchor the person to the action.

Separation – A similar question is used but instead of thinking how important success is to you, ask how important is it to others? Ideally both scores should be high; if there is a gap between the two then some work will need to be done on alignment before taking the first step.

SMARTIES highlights the term emotional attachment, something that needs to be addressed before unleashing yourself on a path of action. Taking time to think through and create understanding around why this is important to you is time well spent. Ask yourself the question why or, better still, ask someone who knows you well to pose the question. If you can push your thinking beyond the soundbite and unearth the real reason, you will have a chance of creating the glue between your wish and your actions.