

Accomplishing Goals...What Does it Take?

"Not so easy to find the balance, for if one does not have wild dreams of achievement, there is not spur to get the dishes washed. One must think like a hero to behave like a merely decent human being."

— May Sarton, *Journal of a Solitude*

Let's start in the beginning...

Creating the future begins with identifying a set of outcomes that will not happen unless you do something different from what you are currently doing. In other words, just continuing to do what you do every day will produce a future. It will produce a future that is already going to happen.

Sometimes the path you are on is remarkable and you just need to get on with what you are already lined up to do.

Other times, you can imagine an additional set of futures...

- things that you are not getting around to doing
- experiences you'd like to have
- unfinished business
- ideas to be pursued
- places to go, people to meet (Dr. Suess)

In a practical sense, let's look at a year as our time of focus. Set aside our dismal history of New Year's resolutions. Begin by simply asking, what would make for a remarkable year? Just list what comes to mind in terms of themes or areas of your life. Your list will probably include, health, home improvements, hobbies, new experiences, finances, work, learning, and so on.

Now list enough qualifiers for each area so you have a sense that what you would like to accomplish in each area is fairly well described. That is, if you do what you describe, it will be a great year. Note that getting this far in the exercise will often have you wanting to get on with working on things! That's the impact of awareness. Simply being in touch with what you want often leads to action. Of course, we all know that this awareness fades quickly, especially if we are

busy, and who isn't busy? So, we need more than awareness working for us.

At this point, you could expand what you are thinking about in terms of futures by doing a number of things:

- You could ask colleagues, friends and loved ones to look over our goals and suggest additions.
- You could think about describing each goal in even higher terms.
- You could set your list aside for a couple of days and then revisit it.
- You could think about what would become possible once we accomplish each goal.

Next, ensure that each goal is written in a way that success can be measured numerically. That is, you will clearly know whether the goal is achieved. Some goals can be expressed as outcomes that are realistically achieved. For instance, lose a certain amount of weight or save a certain amount of money. Others, like shoot ten rounds of golf with a score of less than 80 or write a book, cannot be guaranteed. For these, you need to add an activity that can be measured, tracked, and achieved, such as play seventy rounds of golf or write an average of ten hours per week on the book.

These activities need to be doable, and there needs to be a certain logic that connects the activity to the end result. While you can't guarantee the goal, you can focus and guarantee accomplishment of the activity, which at this point is your best estimate of how to achieve the goal.

Once you have the landscape of goals described, find some way to start working on each goal. Different types of goals require different approaches. Let's consider the tools you can use to get started and stay in action on your various goals.

Awareness ... Simply reminding yourself of these goals on a daily or weekly basis will produce results. Some people put pictures in conspicuous places. Some people add their goals to their calendars or daily planners.

Tracking and measuring ... Someone once said, if you want something, measure it. This is a way of adding visibility and awareness. It also confronts you with a lack of progress, if that begins to occur.

Getting started ... Consider that work on each goal is either occurring or it is not. I wouldn't count thinking about a goal or worrying about it as work. I would include detailed planning if the planning leads to action. *Getting started* seems obvious and therefore not very powerful. It's actually very powerful. So the ability to tell the truth about whether you are at work or not and then doing something is very useful. And don't worry about the perfect action; just do *something*.

Another key point is the notion of starting even when you don't feel like it. If you wait until you feel like it, you are doomed. Just think about it. Many goals are in areas that you never really *want* to be, but it's still something you've decided needs to be done. Effective people, while they do try to work on things when they are up for it, also know they can't always wait for the supportive feeling or attitude. They simply say, *I'm going to start and work on this for fifteen or twenty minutes. If by then, I'm not into it, I'll stop.* Two great results occur. Many times there's an attitude shift. And if not, you've got at least fifteen minutes of progress.

Bite or an elephant ... Following this line of thought, we often wait for a big enough block of time, say two to four hours or a free weekend, before starting on some projects. Every project or goal can be broken down into smaller pieces, and you can work on any goal for at least fifteen minutes a day. Persistence and fifteen minutes will handle lots of elephants.

Or create smaller projects—let's say four-hour projects. Then be intentional about completing one

of these four-hour projects each week. Think about how much you can achieve on a long-term goal with steady progress via weekly projects.

Milestones ... Long-term or large goals and projects can also benefit from the use of milestones, such as every two weeks. If the goal is going to cover twelve months, invent an outcome that you can complete in two weeks. Creating milestones does a number of things.

- First, it breaks the elephant down into more manageable segments.
- Second, milestones give you a path to the outcome that will work if you stay on the path.
- Third, they let you know if you are getting behind.
- Fourth, milestones create a sense of urgency by giving you a regular deadline.

Note that human beings can perform quite amazing feats up against a deadline. Consider students working on papers the night before they are due or what your work week looks like before you leave on a two-week vacation. Milestones take advantage of this! If our goal has a deadline that is too far out, we don't need to do something this week or today. Put a little pressure on yourself. There is a difference between creative tension that is empowering and overwhelming tension that gets in the way. Set milestones that work for you.

Schedule events ... Adding specific events to your calendar will cause you to do things, such as having guests over for a barbecue might cause you to finish the deck. Or signing up for a 10K run will get you out running. Events are an example of a broader concept, called making a public commitment.

Make a public commitment ... Without a public commitment on the line, you don't *have* to be at work—no one is expecting anything of you. Effective people utilize the fact that if they put their honor or concern about what others might think of them on the line, they'll get to work so they live up to the expectations of others.

What might become possible if I accomplish this? ... Often your goals are exciting enough to

compel you to be at work on them. But when they are not, you need to let yourself imagine what could become possible with the accomplishment of this first goal. If you achieve this, then what might become possible? And what becomes possible after that? Getting in touch with higher-order outcomes can be both exciting and empowering.

Enabling structures or systems... Effective people are always looking for a way to make life easier in terms of accomplishment. They realize that self-discipline is often fleeting—nice when it's present, but not reliable. So, they look for structural or systematic ways to make a difficult chore easy. Like playing golf to get your walking done. Or walking with a friend every day instead of making yourself get out on your own. Or hiring someone to do something you can't do routinely on your own. Or using iPhoto to organize and print your photos. Many apps have become enabling systems or structures for setting goals, creating reminders, or keeping track of projects.

Give your word and keep it... This is a subset of making a public commitment. And like the other ideas here, it will either work for you or not. Each week simply promise someone what actions you will take this week. Choose someone who will not go along with your excuses but will confront you with non-delivery. You need a true friend for this. You also need to be specific about what you will do and pick a completion date. Think of it as doing thing X by time Y.

Thinking with someone... Building on the idea of a true friend, many people who are committed to high levels of performance have coaches. And while part of coaching that is about teaching, in this instance, they are looking for a colleague or friend who will help them stay in touch with the possibilities they are pursuing, review recent progress, listen to the temporary setbacks, and think through next steps, so that the next week will be one of accomplishment.

Who has expertise... A significant portion of life is something that others know how to do easily, and if we could access their expertise, we'd be off and running, such as someone who's been to New Zealand who can help get your trip planned. Or someone who is accomplished at PhotoShop and loves to help people get started on their own photo collections.

Say no... Sometimes, to make room for new projects, you need to say no to something else. If you don't, you won't make progress and then you'll begin to question your commitment.

The first step is to find four to eight hours each week to work on the new goal. What might you stop doing? Where can you carve out some time and then protect it? Be careful about making new commitments. By definition, whenever you say yes to something, you are saying no to something else. Make new commitments carefully against the background of your goals. Is this new commitment as important to you as your goals? Will it advance one of your goals? If not, say no.

If you aren't productive... It's also useful to be honest about the cost of not working on our goals. It doesn't take a whole lot to get us into doubting our self-worth. Life isn't easy under any circumstances. We get constant reminders about the parts of the world that are not going well. It's enough to get even a good person down. One thing we can do is to stay productive. Make every day count. Don't waste an evening... or at least not every evening in the week.

Not giving in to the circumstances... Personally I give into the circumstances all the time. And each time I don't give in, accomplishment and sometimes miracles happen. For example, I'm committed to being a better golfer. But a little cold weather or not having someone with whom I can play often decide for me whether I work on my game. Where are you giving in to the circumstances?

*"Forget about likes and dislikes. Just do what must be done.
That might not be happiness but it is greatness."*

—George Bernard Shaw, British playwright