



## LEARNING FROM PRACTICE

# *Goal Setting:* A Five-Step Approach to Behavior Change

GARY P. LATHAM

### SUPERORDINATE GOAL

A superordinate goal captures the “heart” because it focuses primarily on affect; it appeals to emotion. In doing so, a superordinate goal gives people a cause they can rally around. The purpose of a superordinate or overarching goal is to capture the imagination, and hence to galvanize people to take action. A superordinate goal reflects the power of language expressed in ways that convey to people something they can believe in. Hence a superordinate goal facilitates self-management. It is a “call to arms.”

Winston Churchill was a leader in the political arena who would earn an A from psychologists for developing a superordinate goal that appeals to the “heart.” When bombs were raining down with devastating effects on London, when flying for the Royal Air force (RAF) was tantamount to suicide because British airplanes were inferior to those made in Germany, when England

was nearing defeat, Churchill ignited the “will” of the English with such statements as: “A thousand years from now, when people turn back the pages of history they will read, this was indeed England’s finest hour.” With regard to the RAF, Churchill said that “never have so few done so much for so many.” And in the blackest hour of World War II, he intoned, “Never surrender.”

Another exemplary figure in the political arena was Martin Luther King. Whether he or she resides in Europe or Asia, North or South America, Africa or Australia, everyone recognizes: “I have a dream.” Similarly, John F. Kennedy captured the hearts of many Americans in establishing a superordinate goal during his inaugural address: “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” Pierre Trudeau, when Prime Minister of Canada, set the overarching goal for Canadians to create “the just society.”

In the private sector, Walt Disney was irritated by the fact that children under five years old frequently complain because they cannot go to school. Shortly after they reach the age of five and attend school, however, they whine about having to go to school. Commands from the teacher to sit up straight, sit still, wipe that smile off your face, and stop talking, convince most children that school is less than an ideal place to be. Hence the superordinate goal at the Walt Disney Co. is "learning through entertainment." At Microsoft Corp. in the 1980s the superordinate goal was "information at your fingertips." Among the superordinate goals at General Electric Co. (GE) is the "boundaryless organization." This goal was articulated by former chief executive officer (CEO) Jack Welch as a result of the knowledge that was hoarded within, rather than shared between, divisions of GE.

Bottom-up goals are frequently more powerful than those that are primarily top-down because they are expressed in the language of the employees. Three questions that tap into emotion or affect in developing a "bottom-up" superordinate goal are listed below.

- (1) Why do we exist as a unit?
- (2) Who would miss us if we were gone?
- (3) What is our primary source of discontent?

A newspaper in Washington state, owned by the *Washington Post*, was in danger of being closed because it was consistently in the red, as most readers subscribed to the *Seattle Times*. The answer to the second question posed above was "no one." The sole exception to that answer, of course, was the newspaper's employees. After several hours of brainstorming answers to the first question, a superordinate goal was set around one three letter word: THE, that is, "THE Source of News for the County." There were over 900,000 people in the county where the paper was located. Consequently, the paper shifted its focus on global news to issues of concern to the county's residents. Within one quarter, the

paper was profitable, and it remains profitable to the present day.

Maintenance and production employees were at war in a newspaper plant after production employees coined the term "maintenance shuffle." Maintenance employees were described by their production colleagues as being notoriously slow in getting to the work site, and even slower in getting the requested work orders done. As electricians, machinists and journeymen, the maintenance employees took offense to the sobriquet given to them by their relatively uneducated union brothers and sisters in production.

The supervisor called the maintenance people together. With minimum outside help, he was able to get them to focus on answers to the third question posed above, namely, "What is our primary source of discontent?" They were irritated by constantly being put into a reactive mode by production: "Go here;" "Don't go there;" "We now need you over here." In the minds of maintenance employees, the production people had no idea which work orders were a priority to be completed. Maintenance stated that, "Production is making us crazy." Hence the superordinate goal of maintenance became: "We resource those who plan." That is, production units who meet with maintenance on a quarterly basis to set mutually agreed upon maintenance goals get first priority; production units who inform maintenance of their goals on a quarterly basis get second priority; the remaining production units, those with no goals, are given third priority. As a result of setting this superordinate goal, one cohesive team emerged from these two conflicting parties. Within 18 months, all production and maintenance units were setting mutually agreed upon goals on a quarterly basis.

The downside of articulating a superordinate goal is that in many organizations it is frequently nothing more than an empty slogan (e.g., "To be the employer of choice"). Hence superordinate goals can become a source of cynicism. They can raise expectations of employees only to have them dashed. The antidote for this cynicism is goal setting.

## GOAL SETTING

Whereas a superordinate goal appeals primarily to affect, goal setting is first and foremost a cognitive variable. The purpose of goal setting is to make the superordinate goal concrete, to move it from emotional rhetoric to concrete action steps. To do this, the goal must be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and have a time-frame (SMART).

For Walt Disney, the superordinate goal of "learning through entertainment" led to the setting of SMART goals, which in turn led to the construction of Epcot Center. The goal is for people to be wiser and more knowledgeable at 5 p.m., after an entertaining day in the Center, than they were at 8:55 a.m., while waiting in line. Bill Gates recalled exhausted parents in the 1950s responding to the incessant questions of their children with "look it up in the encyclopedia." His SMART goal was to find a way to enable anyone to learn about anything from computer software run on a desktop in the kitchen.

More than 500 laboratory and field experiments in psychology have shown that urging people to do their best, to "get on this task right away," pales in comparison to the person's performance from setting a SMART goal. This is because a specific high goal allows people to evaluate their performance in relation to the goal, to make adjustments where necessary, to increase their effort, and to persist until the concrete goal is attained. This is difficult if not impossible when employees are told "to do one's best." To achieve concrete goals one must "do what is required." A goal "to do one's best" allows some people to delude themselves into believing they are performing well, while others are unnecessarily critical of their performance. For example, a goal to be "the high quality, low cost space exploration industry in the world" is too vague to affect meaningful behavior. Contrast that vague goal with the SMART goal set by President Kennedy in 1962: "We will put a man on the moon within this decade and return him safely to earth."

Goals are also effective because they provide people with a challenge as well as feelings of accomplishment when progress is made toward goal attainment. Goals even provide meaning to otherwise meaningless tasks. During World War II, the Germans required POWs to shovel dirt into wheelbarrows, empty the wheelbarrows nearby, refill the wheelbarrow, and return the dirt to where it had been dug. Why? Because they wanted to see what people do when the work they perform is void of meaning. What was the result? After several months, people went mad. As a North American psychologist, allow me to repeat the experiment involving dirt, shovel, and "wheelbarrow." Working in dyads, I will only ask that you and your partner set a goal in terms of time to complete the task. In brief, I am simply setting up a relay race for you that has been taking place at picnics for centuries. Goals introduce a sense of fun through competition with self and others.

In the forest products industry, harvesting trees hour after hour can be tiring monotonous work. When loggers set a specific high goal as to the number of trees each person would cut in a day and in a week, both attendance and performance increased significantly. People bragged about their accomplishments in a manner similar to what one hears on a golf course.

Goals can reduce stress if they are few in number. This is because goals not only provide people with a sense of purpose, they enable people to see the progress they are making in relation to the goals. Goals remove the ambiguity as to the criteria for which you and others will hold yourself accountable. If the goals are too many, such as 37 rather than three to seven, the focus that a goal provides is lost. Setting too many goals invites "cherry picking" the easy ones, and procrastinating on the important ones.

The downside of goal setting is the necessity of finding ways to obtain goal commitment. Without commitment there is no goal. A tool that can be used to understand ways of gaining goal commitment is the empathy box. This box, shown in Fig. 1, is based on

**FIGURE 1 THE EMPATHY BOX**

	Outcomes Expected	
	+	-
goal commitment	1 ?	2 ?
goal rejection	3 ?	4 ?

two principles, namely: understand the outcomes people expect and you will understand their behavior; change the outcomes people expect and you will change their behavior.

I was contacted by a client in the forest products industry whose goal was to reduce theft to \$1,000 a year or less. Theft was so bad, that in addition to stealing from the company, employees were even stealing from one another. Consequently, management and the union selected individuals at random for me to interview. As a psychologist, I guaranteed anonymity. Through random selection, I met the thieves. Among their responses to the questions in the empathy box were the following:

### Cell 1

What positive outcomes do you expect for being honest? What are the upsides? How will you come out ahead? The most common answer was "nothing."

### Cell 2

What negative outcomes do you expect for being honest? What are the downsides? How will you lose? The answers included harassment by and isolation from peers. One supervisor was reprimanded by the HR manager for having grievances filed, due to his catching people who were attempting to remove

company material from the site without permission. When other supervisors learned of the reprimand, the mindset adopted among the supervisors was "hear no evil, see no evil."

### Cell 3

What positive outcomes do you expect from stealing? What are the upsides? How will you come out ahead? No one was selling the stolen goods, nor were they using them. No one reported theft as a way of expressing anger toward the company. The answers given to us included the "challenge," the "thrill," and the "excitement." The answers included "pride in performance," and, "We are so good, we could steal a headrig from a sawmill." A headrig weighs more than a ton. They even wanted to involve me in their feelings of accomplishment. "Tell us what you want and we will get it out within 45 days."

### Cell 4

What negative outcomes do you expect from stealing? What are the downsides? How will you lose? No one feared dismissal. The company has a guaranteed log export policy to Japan. The employees who were stealing belong to a strong militant union. The company does not wish to spark a wildcat strike. At worst, employees who are caught stealing might get suspended. If this occurs, a collection is taken on their behalf in the union hall. Other than a suspension, the thieves feared losing arguments among themselves as to whose turn it was to store the stolen material. "The stuff is clogging up our garages, basements, and attics."

As noted earlier, the value of the empathy box is it provides a systematic way of "walking in the shoes of others." The first principle of the box, as noted above, is if you understand outcomes people expect you will understand their behavior. Why was the goal for honest behavior rejected? Because of the challenge, excitement, and thrill from theft.

The second key principle of the empathy box is that changes in outcome expectancies bring about a change in behavior. In this instance, goal commitment rather than rejection. Thus the fifth question posed to senior management was: "What has to shift, what has to change to get goal commitment, to get people into cell 1?" Clues as to potentially correct answers can usually be found to the answers in cells 2 and 3.

Putting emphasis on cell 4, punishment, should always be viewed as a last resort. Cell 4 is where the IRS and Revenue Canada agents put their emphasis. Failure to pay taxes will lead to the payment of principal plus interest, and if the failure to pay taxes can be proven to be intentional, it can also lead to a jail sentence. A focus on cell 4 can quickly lead to a punishment culture throughout the organization that fosters a mindset among employees to "not get mad, get even." It's called subversion.

When I presented the results of the empathy box to management, they quickly decided to install hidden cameras and hire Pinkerton detectives to masquerade as employees. "We are going to catch those thieves and we are going to prosecute them." Imagine the surprise of the senior management team when I informed them I had been asked to make those very recommendations to them. "Who asked you to make those recommendations to us?" queried one of the vice presidents. Who indeed?

Imagine the surprise of the senior management team when I replied "the thieves." "Why would the thieves ask you to tell us to put in hidden cameras?" "Well, guess what they intend to do with the cameras?" I replied, "Steal them." Installing cameras increases the challenge, the sense of accomplishment. Putting in cameras increases the thrill and excitement of the theft. And more than one thief joked about kidnapping the Pinkerton detectives.

Because the thieves expected to experience fun and excitement from accomplishing theft, the company adopted the policy of a library. On an announced Friday in May, people were informed they could borrow

rather than steal what they wanted from the company. Allowing people to borrow equipment from the company caused a fury of activity within the company's legal department. This in turn was a bit of a thrill for all but the lawyers. They produced reams of paper that required the borrower's signature indicating that, should the borrower get hurt while using the equipment, the company was not responsible, etc. The excitement the thieves expected from stealing was now effectively removed.

Again, based on the policy of the library, an amnesty day was announced where people could return that which had been stolen—under the assumption they did not take it, but were returning it for a friend. So much material was returned from the clogged garages, basements, and attics that the company extended amnesty from a Friday to a Saturday.

Two caveats before leaving the subject of goal setting. First, when people have the necessary knowledge and skill to attain the goal, a performance outcome goal should be set (e.g., revenue to be earned; costs to be reduced). Goals affect choice, effort, and persistence. However, when people lack the knowledge or skill for goal attainment, a SMART learning rather than an outcome goal should be set. A learning goal, as the name implies, focuses attention on the discovery of strategies and skills necessary for goal attainment. Hence, the emphasis is on the development of procedures or systems necessary for mastering the task. Thus a good golfer with a low handicap should set a goal in terms of the desired score. A poor golfer should set a goal in terms of acquiring the skills necessary for using a 3 wood or a 1 driver, or in the adept use of the putter. In short, a learning goal focuses attention on skill or knowledge acquisition rather than on a specific performance outcome. Setting learning goals leads eventually to the ability to profit from setting performance goals.

Second, among the biggest impediments to the effectiveness of goal setting is environmental uncertainty. Information that is true at one point in time may become obsolete at a

later point in time due to rapid environmental changes. As uncertainty increases, it becomes increasingly difficult to set a SMART goal. The solution is to set proximal or subgoals in addition to the distal goal.

For example, in organizations where, without warning, there are dramatic price fluctuations, setting a specific high outcome goal can result in profits that are significantly worse than a mindset to “do their best.” But, when people set proximal or sub goals in addition to the performance goal, profits are significantly higher than in the case where only a SMART performance goal is set, or when people adopt the abstract goal to do one’s best. In highly dynamic settings, it is important to actively search for feedback and react quickly. Sub goals increase error management. Errors provide information as to whether one’s picture of reality is congruent with goal attainment. There is an increase in information for people to take into account when proximal or sub goals are set. In addition to the increase in information from setting proximal goals, the attainment of them increases overall goal commitment; it increases the belief that the end goal is indeed attainable.

## INTEGRITY

Leaders must model commitment to the superordinate and SMART goals. Hence, an organization’s leaders need to take a long look in the mirror to see whether their words and actions are consistent with the superordinate and SMART goals that have been set. To the extent they are not, leaders are a primary source of hypocrisy in the workforce. The problem for leaders is they are often unaware of the signals they send. These signals are frequently inadvertent or unconsciously sent. Thus it is incumbent upon leaders to find ways (e.g., set learning goals) to make people comfortable, informing them of when what they are doing is seen as incongruent to the superordinate or SMART goals. Experience has shown this is often accomplished by informal rather than formal

means. That is, it’s accomplished through a discussion with people over coffee, in the hallway, at lunch, etc. regarding the following questions:

(1) Is the superordinate goal still applicable? Does it still galvanize people?

(2) Are we pursuing the right SMART goals? Are they too hard/easy?

(3) Are there situational constraints to goal attainment?

(4) Is there anything I am saying or doing as the leader of this team that is getting in the way of goal attainment or reducing goal commitment? What would you like to see me start doing, stop doing, or continue doing in this regard?

## ACCESSIBILITY

It is difficult to be an effective leader when you are inaccessible to the people who are on your team. Leaders need to be accessible for at least two reasons: (1) to let people know what they are doing is both noticed and appreciated with regard to goal attainment, and (2) to encourage dissent with the goals that are set.

Just as engineers strengthen and reinforce bridges, leaders need to strengthen and reinforce behavior that is consistent with the superordinate and SMART goals. If this is not done, apathy is the likely outcome. Most people can recall the date they were fired from a job; few of us can recall when apathy set in. When did the excitement for, the challenge of goal attainment dissipate? Apathy is cancer-like, because its onset and growth is usually insidious. Recognizing and acknowledging people is an effective antidote to apathy.

Immediately after World War II, studies were done comparing POWs who died rather quickly with others, physiologically similar, who survived. An explanation is portrayed in the film *Bridge Over the River Kwai*. When a British soldier was placed in solitary confinement, his goal was to survive in order to increase the morale of the soldiers in the camp. The goal of the soldiers was to “be

present” for the person in solitary confinement. How was the latter operationalized? How was it SMART? Immediately upon seeing the soldier emerge from solitary confinement there was a whistle throughout the camp, where upon all the soldiers stopped what they were doing, stood at attention and saluted. To whom was the salute given? In addition to the soldier who had been in solitary confinement, God, King, and Country. The signal cogently sent to the enemy by the British was: no one could break a British soldier; when you put one British soldier in solitary confinement, you put the entire British army in solitary confinement; when you free one British soldier, you free the entire POW camp. Through goal setting there can be a sense of cohesion, a sense of unity, a sense of one team. Goal setting is the manifestation of needs and values.

This fact is not lost on effective union leaders. Employees have a need to have their welfare taken into account in the organizational decisions that will affect them. Hence union leaders stress the value of solidarity within the workforce. In grievance meetings, in contract negotiations, union leaders set specific concrete goals that reflect needs and values of the employees whom they represent. Lack of attention to the needs, values, and goals of employees usually results in the derailment of the leader, as was shown by the departure of the CEO of American Airlines in the spring of this year.

In organizational settings there is often a desire to change the culture. Culture refers to the shared values and behaviors that differentiate one organization from another. Working with a government owned nuclear power plant, I found that a relatively effective way to change the culture is to (a) identify the behaviors that define the desired culture, (b) set SMART learning or behavioral goals for teams and individuals, and (c) acknowledge that what people are doing in relation to the goals is noticed and appreciated.

A powerful source of behavior change in relation to goal attainment is one’s peers. At monthly staff meetings, people in the nuclear

plant go around the table singling out an individual with regard to one behavior that the individual was observed doing in relation to goal attainment. For example, an employee is acknowledged by another for seeking divergent viewpoints before making a decision. The outcome of this acknowledgment is three-fold. First, people on the team learn who is doing what. Second, they learn what is appreciated—and by whom. Third, the person who is engaging in the behavior learns that the behavior is appreciated, and the behavior is reinforced. The outcome people expect as a result of this exercise is that they too will earn the appreciation of their peers if they engage in similar behavior.

This exercise is proving beneficial in shifting the current government/bureaucratic culture of the nuclear plant to that of a privatized customer-driven organization. Table 1 shows the behaviors that the organization’s leaders identified as characterizing the present versus the desired culture. Employees are given opportunities to acknowledge in team meetings who is doing what to bring about the desired culture change.

A downside of goal setting is people committing to that which they know to be wrong, in order to remain considered by others as part of the team. This phenomenon is called group-think. Engineers know that an O ring is unlikely to seal below 50–55 °F. Nevertheless, the pressure from, and excite-

**TABLE 1 CULTURE CHANGE**

PRESENT CULTURE	DESIRED CULTURE
Internal Focus	External Focus
Gossiping	Communicative
Self-absorption	Self-interest
Transmit	Receive
Pension	Bonus
Silo	Team
Hire clones/subordinates	Hire successors/ iconoclasts
Half-empty	Half-full
Nervous	Optimistic

ment among, the team members to meet a launch deadline may overwhelm a person's desire to express dissent. The outcome that one can expect is the disaster of the space shuttle, the Challenger.

An effective strategy to address groupthink is to appoint and rotate "nay sayers" before a final decision is made. Their specific goal is to find one or more fatal flaws in the proposed decision. If the same people are always the nay sayers, their comments will likely be discredited: "Those people are never supportive of anything."

## MEASUREMENT

An axiom in psychology is that which gets measured, gets done. Measurement conveys loudly and clearly what organizational decision makers believe is important, versus what they say is important. Effective leaders ensure that the measurement system is aligned with the superordinate and SMART goals. If people are rewarded and promoted on metrics that do not support the goals, zealots will remain committed to the goals, everyone else will focus on "that which gets measured."

When dysfunctional behavior is observed, the cause more frequently lies in the goals and/or measurement system than it does in the person who is exhibiting the behavior. For example, to improve the responsiveness of the human resources department to line management, an organization named a line manager as the Director of HR. When I queried the line managers a year later as to how the HR director was doing in his new role, they responded by questioning me as to how HR could ruin a good person so quickly. The mystery was removed when the goals against which he and the HR department were measured were explained to them. Change the goals, change the behavior. That which gets measured against goals almost always gets done.

In a professional consulting firm, people were evaluated on their attainment of revenue goals for new and existing clients. The

result led to behavior detrimental to staff development as well as the overall good of the firm. Partners ignored exhortations by their senior management team to find ways to reduce voluntary staff turnover. The Firm was being hurt in multiple ways: loss of "benchstrength" in terms of staff capable of being promoted to partner; loss of money invested in developing staff who subsequently left the Firm; loss of competent human resources to work on business that the partners were bringing to the Firm. Why would the partners knowingly engage in behavior dysfunctional for both the staff and their Firm? Their paychecks, their year-end bonuses, and their status within the Firm were all based primarily on the client revenue that they generated. Consequently, the partners devoted their time to their clients. Thus the Firm's senior management committee implemented a balanced scorecard where SMART goals are now set for client, people, and firm. The formula is multiplicative. Hence the partners have three priorities rather than one. The outcome that a partner can expect from earning a perfect 10 on client and a zero on staff or Firm is to be counseled to leave the organization.


## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Superordinate goals galvanize and excite people. They give people a cause that they can rally around. The downside is that they can play with people's emotions; they can be a source of cynicism in that they are nothing more than rhetoric. The solution is goal setting. Specific high goals make the superordinate goal concrete. They make clear what people have to do to make the superordinate goal a reality. To gain goal commitment, one must understand the outcomes that people expect from attaining the goal. If the outcomes are positive, goal commitment is likely. In addition, leaders must be sensitive to the signals they send that may be misinterpreted by others as lack of support for



the goals. In addition, they have to make people aware that what they accomplish in relation to goal attainment is both noticed and appreciated. However, to minimize groupthink regarding the goals that are set, leaders must also encourage dissent with the goals. Finally, leaders must ensure that the

measurement system is aligned with the goals. If there is a misalignment, dysfunctional behavior is all but guaranteed.

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**Gary P. Latham** is formerly the Ford Motor Research professor and chairman of the Management and Organization Department of the Business School at the University of Washington. He is now the Secretary of State professor of Organizational Effectiveness in the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto. He is one of three persons in Canada who is a Fellow of the Academy of Management and is the only Canadian who is a member of the prestigious Society of Organizational Behavior. Latham consults widely in industry, and has authored and coauthored numerous books.