

Progressive Goal Planning™:

An Alternative Approach to Setting and Achieving Goals

By Keith Norris

Nearly everyone, at some point, has encountered the idea that setting goals is a key to achieving success. We find this notion everywhere, including in books and magazines, on television, in classrooms and seminars, and in blogs, newsletters, articles, and white papers.

However, despite the pervasiveness of this idea and the good intentions of those who try to embrace it, most people fail to successfully set and achieve their goals. Studies on the topic have consistently shown that there is a strong correlation between goal planning and success, but research has also revealed widespread failure among people and organizations to successfully execute goal planning.

5 Reasons Why Most People Never Set Goals

So why don't more people write their goals? We can start to answer that by answering 'Why don't people set goals at all?' We know people with goals succeed. Here are five reasons, as written in reliableplant.com by Douglas Vermeeran:

- No motivation. Many people feel no need to change. They have settled into a comfort zone, satisfied with their situation, without sufficient pain to want change.
- Fear of failure. Some people have no belief in their ability to achieve a goal, and thus don't start.
- What friends will say. On one hand, they fear being laughed at if they fail. On the other hand they fear being outcast when they succeed.
- Not worthy of success. People who have poor self-esteem and lack confidence just cannot see themselves achieving anything, so ask 'Why set goals?'
- Paralysis of Analysis. Some people want to have all the answers before they can begin working towards a goal. They let self-doubt keep them locked where they are.

6 Reasons Why Most People Fail to Achieve Their Goals

Even after goals are set, there are a number of various reasons why individuals and organizations will fail to achieve their goals. When analyzed objectively these various reasons begin to fit in to a specific pattern. This pattern forms a cycle of negative performance toward goal achievement. We call this the *The Cycle of Goal Setting Dysfunction*. All too often, the cycle unfolds as follows:

1. Poor definition/ lack of commitment: While goals are a tremendous asset to any person or organization, poorly defined goals have the potential to destroy progress, kill motivation, and create attitudes and culture that are worse than they would be if the goal had never been set.

When goals are poorly defined or ambiguous, they are often viewed as irrelevant, and there is frequently a general feeling of apathy about them. Thus, the goal planning process can come to an abrupt end before it truly begins.

2. Fear of Failure: When a goal is seen as overly ambitious or punitive, the people responsible for achieving that goal can begin to fear failure and veer off course. Although they may not blatantly attempt to derail the goal, their subconscious fears and resentment may lead them to procrastinate, pursue more realistic goals, or find other activities to fill their time and attention.

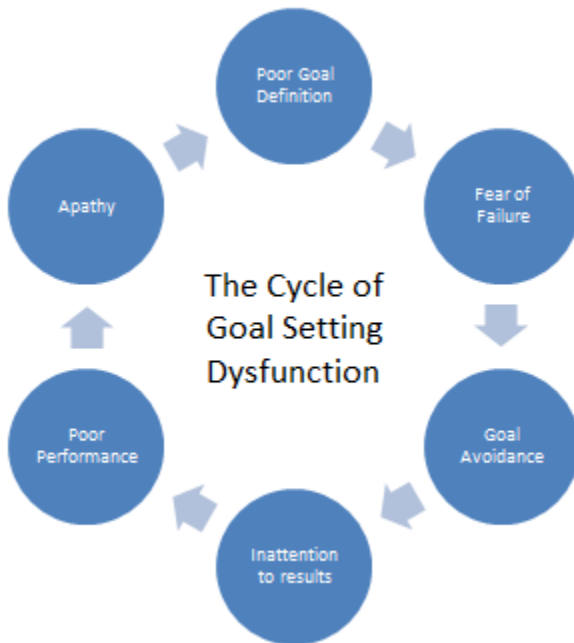
3. Goal Avoidance: If there is a fear of failure, a lack of commitment, or a sense that a goal is unrealistic, the tendency of the person is to avoid the goal or avoid the system of measuring the goal. As soon those responsible for achieving a goal start avoiding your system for measuring results, it becomes much more difficult to decipher the level of effort that they are expending. Even worse, their attentiveness to achieving the goal can begin wane.

4. Inattention to Results: Once you stop keeping score, it is much more difficult to measure how well you are performing. But, even if you are still keeping score, the inattention that comes from lack of commitment, fear of failure, or avoidance can lead to poor performance.

5. Poor Performance: Without attention to results or measurement against goals, performance generally declines.

6. Apathy: Once poor performance has emerged, a general feeling of failure often sets in, which reinforces the fear of failure, and apathy about the overall goal setting process can take hold. This makes it even more difficult to identify and pursue good, clear goals.

If goal setting is implemented incorrectly, the person or organization will likely feel apathetic toward goals in general and develop a subtle or outright dislike of their use. Moreover, if people feel like goals are being used as a way to tell them that they are not good enough or don't deserve recognition or a merit increase in pay, they will learn to dislike and even resent the goal planning process.



Problems with Traditional Goal Planning

In traditional goal planning, there is typically a quest for a single goal that becomes the end in mind. Traditional goal planners will usually identify "The One Big Goal" and then reverse engineer the steps that must be taken to achieve it. This is a valuable method when a singular, final objective is known. However, it is often difficult for people to clearly articulate and define "The One Big Goal". There is a tendency to take on too much too soon and set a goal that is unrealistic and potentially unattainable. This can lead to an unwanted entry into The Cycle of Goal Setting Dysfunction and beginning with poor goal definition.

Conversely, some people suffer from a similar problem but in reverse. They feel that the goals that they have set are "not enough", and attaining them will not bring them the ultimate success that they want to achieve. In organizations, it may be more comfortable to declare that we should "do our best" rather than set a goal that is too easily attained.

Moreover, the path to an end goal may be unclear, and there may be so many secondary possibilities and such significant variability that it becomes difficult to establish secondary goals. In either case, the result is often a person or organization that does not feel engaged with the goal, and, thus, is unlikely to achieve it. Ultimately, these problems can feed into nearly all the stages in The Cycle of Goal Setting Dysfunction, including poor goal definition, goal avoidance, inattention to results, poor performance, and apathy.

Breaking the Cycle with Progressive Goal Planning

Thankfully, there is a way to break The Cycle of Goal Setting Dysfunction and address the problems of traditional goal planning.

Progressive Goal Planning offers a viable and effective alternative when other approaches fail.

Progressive Goal Planning is the process of planning sequential goals that each build upon previously attained goals and ultimately toward the achievement of a greater, overarching goal. However, the end goal is not or may not be known at the beginning of the process.

In Progressive Goal Planning, there is no real end to the process, but there *is* an inherent evolution of goals toward a true endpoint that is not known at the outset but can eventually emerge from the planning process. The evolution is not based on a change of mind, a distraction, or a change of course. It is based on new possibilities and opportunities that become available upon the accomplishment of each intermediary goal.

The Progressive Goal Planning Process

Step 1: Set an Attainable (Relatively) Short-Term Goal:

Any achievable goal set today is better than the promise of something greater tomorrow. If you have any doubt about the viability of annual or longer-term goals, then break them down into smaller and shorter-term goals. If you have any doubt about these subsequent goals, then break them down into even smaller and more near-term objectives. Ultimately, you can break down your goals into weekly or daily objectives.

Set or reduce the timing and magnitude of your goals to the smallest increments necessary to have confidence in both the direction of your activities and their intended outcome. If you find yourself with doubts about the attainability of your goals, uncertainty about how to achieve them, or facing any sort of goal setting crisis, focus on something that you **CAN** be successful in achieving in the near term.

Start with a simple question like, "What is the most important thing I can do today?"

The answer to this question can be the basis for a daily goal. You can use daily goals to pursue and build confidence in larger and longer-term goals with greater meaning and more impact. But never lose sight of the importance of daily goals and making a daily contribution. This can help cultivate attentiveness as you pursue your objectives.

Step 2: Focus on Frequency: Flex Your Goal Muscles

The ability to set and achieve goals is a skill not unlike hitting a golf ball or making a free throw in basketball. If you are going to become good at it, you have to practice and use the skill frequently.

An instructive parallel can be found in the phenomenon of muscle memory, as defined here:

Muscle memory, also known as motor learning, is a form of procedural memory that involves consolidating a specific motor task into memory through repetition. When a movement is repeated over time, a long-term muscle memory is created for that task; eventually allowing it to be performed without conscious effort. This process decreases the need for attention and creates maximum efficiency within the motor and memory systems. Examples of muscle memory are found in many everyday activities that become automatic and improve with practice, such as riding a bicycle or typing on a keyboard.¹

While goal setting is a mental exercise and does not involve a motor task like riding a bicycle, it is a skill that can be honed in much the same way through repetition and practice. And it can deliver invaluable benefits by helping you travel from point A to point B, taking you from planning to achievement and success.

Step 3: Measure for Mastery

Measurement is critically important, and it matters especially if you take your effort seriously. If you want to get really good at something, you must do it repeatedly, but if you want to become the best at something, you must do it repeatedly *and* measure your results. In most situations, success in even the most ambitious goals comes down to executing on the simple things, or a mastery of the basics. Measuring those simple things and keeping score is essential to tracking your progress toward mastery.

To demonstrate the concept of measuring for mastery, there are many good examples in the world of sports. We can take the game of basketball as an ideal example. Have you ever watched a game of pickup basketball where the teams are not keeping score? The game is certainly less organized, and there are often inconsistencies in effort. There are some good moves and occasional bursts of hard play, but it is rare to see everyone on both teams playing at a vigorous pace and with maximum effort. Now compare that with an organized basketball game where the score is being kept. There is a completely different level of participation from the athletes. There is competition, and when the score is being kept, the participants step up their game. They exhibit greater attention and make greater efforts to work together and execute the simple things that are needed to win.

Similar examples can be found in virtually any sport, just as they can be found in business or personal development. When you are keeping score, there is a big difference in the level of attention and effort, and, ultimately, in the end results.

Keep in mind, however, that there is a difference between measurement and accountability. For many people, the term “accountability” has a negative connotation. It is often associated with punitive or negative consequences for failing to achieve a result. In business and personal settings, this association can lead to tendencies to avoid goal setting because of the implied risk

¹ Krakauer, J.W., & Shadmehr, R., “Consolidation of Motor Memory,” *Trends in Neurosciences* 29

of failure. For example, in a corporate setting, there may be fear of termination or other punishment if you fail to achieve a goal.

The purpose of measuring for mastery in Progressive Goal Planning is not to judge a person or an effort as a failure or a success. It should simply be used as a way to measure whether the goal that was set was attainable and was accomplished. The results gathered in the measurement step should have a positive bias toward the affirmative. Stated another way, if you are successfully using the Progressive Goal Planning methodology and therefore getting better at setting and achieving your goals, you should have a higher percentage of goals achieved vs. not achieved. Ultimately, it is this performance in goal setting and achievement that Progressive Goal Planning seeks to cultivate and that measuring for mastery is designed to evaluate.

Step 4: Review & Reset to Correct Your Course: Evaluate New Possibilities

As you pursue your goals, it is critical to review your prior performance. The next step of the Progressive Goal Planning Cycle is to evaluate your performance and to consider the impact of your achieved goals and how they affect your new possibilities. When you review your previously achieved goals as well as your missed targets, you can gain valuable perspectives to help you revise your goals or define your next objectives.

This step of the process is also helpful for identifying goals that may have created unintended consequences or created reward mechanisms that encourage behavior that may not be in alignment with your strategic objectives, or may be manipulations of the goal reward system. By incorporating this review stage in to your process you are able to build in a safety mechanism into your goal setting and achievement process.

At this point, you should also look to previous successes for new opportunities that may have presented and for insights on how to pursue them. Review any missed targets to learn why these goals were not attained and where you may have deviated from your intended course.

An important part of course correction is to see how you can benefit from the experience of prior goal setting and pursuit. As you review your prior performance, you may discover that your perspective has changed and that a new direction may be in order. If you find yourself getting closer to your stated goal but further away from what “feels” like the right objective or path, you should dig deeper into those feelings and look for potential insights and course changes. The purpose of goal setting should be to accelerate your achievement toward your strategic objectives. This step in the process is designed to make sure that is happening and you are not following your goals blindly in to a course that will take you off track.

Applications of Progressive Goal Planning

Progressive Goal Planning in a Company Setting

Progressive Goal Planning can be used as a way to describe your company's approach to goal setting on an individual, departmental, or company-wide basis. Progressive Goal Planning sets

the tone for frequent and successful goal campaigns. It sets the tone for individual and personal engagement in goals. It can create a culture and establish an expectation of a contribution from each employee toward a particular goal. It sets a framework and an expectation for achievement and success and establishes a culture of productivity. It invites each employee to push to regularly set and pursue goals. It invites managers to act as coaches in the goal creation process. The main idea is that, if your organization sets enough goals, those involved will become more adept at discerning good goals from bad goals and more skillful in establishing goals that can help you achieve your greater mission or vision.

A company that commits to the “Progressive Goal Planning” Methodology has embraced the following:

- A commitment to improve people, performance, and processes
- A commitment to fail fast and learn from mistakes
- A commitment to measure and keep score
- A commitment to recognize and develop successful habits
- A commitment to build people
- A commitment to embrace positive change
- A desire to coach rather than criticize

A word of caution: don't confuse the frequency of goals for a lack of attention to high priority goals. If your company is able to clearly articulate and identify a truly important goal, then, of course, it should be front and center. Other, more frequent goals should be created to support this overall goal.

It is also important that your managers emphasize and embrace the coaching aspect of goal planning. A well implemented “Progressive Goal Planning” culture with a commitment to coaching will have a higher percentage of goals achieved than goals not achieved.

Progressive Goal Planning in a Personal Setting

Progressive Goal Planning can also be embraced on a personal level, whether it involves work and career objectives or goals in your home or family life. Just as Personal Goal Planning can set the tone and establish a culture of frequent and successful goal setting and achievement in a company environment, it can help individuals cultivate the beliefs, commitment, and habits to unlock their full potential and achieve personal success.

On a personal level, if you have committed to the Progressive Goal Planning methodology, you have embraced the following:

- A belief that you are capable of greatness beyond your current vision
- A desire to improve your ability to get things done
- A desire to improve your interactions and relationships with those around you
- A commitment to learn quickly from mistakes
- A commitment to measure and recognize your success
- A commitment to personal responsibility and accountability

Tips for Applying Progressive Goal Planning

- Emphasize frequency. Any achievable goal, today that gets you closer to your ultimate objective, is better than a more ambitious but less attainable goal tomorrow. Lead Measures, which are short-term goals or measures that are predictive of your larger goals, focus on achievement in the near-term and can trigger success. These are usually short-term measures that you can influence or do something about, and if you are attentive to these measures and attain their corresponding results, you will find yourself on the path to achieve your ultimate goals.
- Emphasize the attainable. Big, hairy, audacious goals, or BHAGs, are good for Lag Measures, which are the ultimate, long-term goals that you are trying to achieve. BHAGs and Lag Measures can be good, for example, in aligning the troops in a company and instilling excitement and vision. However, an individual's impact should be measured on a more frequent basis and using Lead Measures. In order to coach employees and encourage positive outcomes, the measurements should be much more granular and more attainable.
- Don't follow goals blindly. Just because a goal is defined does not mean that it is always the right one or that it will get you to where you ultimately need to be. It is important to periodically evaluate your current goals and reward systems to ensure that they are still taking you where you want to be.
- Focus on the opportunity for improvement. Use measurement and frequent review to identify opportunities for improvement and coaching. Emphasize constructive, positive prospects and avoid criticism, including self-criticism.
- Reinforce & Reward Results. Rewards depend a lot on the context. In a personal setting, the reward may be as simple as the feeling of accomplishment. In a company setting, you may need to use monetary incentives, prizes, or other rewards. There are numerous possibilities, so use your imagination and your knowledge of individual motivators to determine rewards and use them for positive reinforcement.

Getting Started with Progressive Goal Planning

To learn more about Progressive Goal Planning and explore tools and resources that are available to help you get started, our planning consultants can help.

[Visit our website](#) for more information, email us at sales@planplusonline.com, or contact us by phone at **801-438-3460**.