

## 6 GOALS AND TARGETS

*"The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but it is too low and we reach it."*

MICHELANGELO

*"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 IN WONDERLAND, LEWIS CARROLL

*"If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans."*

WOODY ALLEN

As I write I remind myself that people can lead incredibly satisfying, worthwhile or successful lives without ever having goals or targets. At the same time, there is no doubt that used well in the right circumstances, they can be highly motivational.

The textbook will tell you that goals give a sense of direction, give you something to review against, help you overcome obstacles and learn/adapt when you are not on track.

In the world of work and life I see goals as tools. Something to use rather than just have.

## **The skill of using gold, silver and bronze goals**

For several years I coached a junior football team. We had enough players for two teams of 11 and when they were young we always just picked two even teams. Players develop physically, tactically and mentally at such different times and it never seemed the right thing to start labelling anyone as better or worse than anyone else.

By the time the boys reached about 11, or first year of secondary school in the UK, we decided it was time to have an A and B team by ability (by now the boys could see how good each other was and the squads pretty much picked themselves anyway).

One of my fellow parent coaches was an ex-professional player and qualified coach and he took the A team. I was very happy to take the B team boys.

That season the second team lost their first game and kept losing.

We lost every game in the first half of the season. Even though I was very aware that the boys played for lots of reasons - to be with mates, to have fun, to score goals, to run around, to try hard, and more (and, 5 minutes after each defeat, they had usually forgotten the score anyway) the game still exists to win, and as coach, even I was getting the teeniest bit bothered at losing every single week.

So I had an idea and suggested to the boys that, in the second half of the season, we try and improve our score against each team. I told them that I had kept the score against each team and that we could aim to improve each time. The boys liked the idea and I gave myself a pat on the back.

Unfortunately, the next game, the first in the second half of the season, was against the team we had lost to in the opening game. We had lost 2-1 and since then, while we had lost every week, they were now unbeaten and topped the league. Added to that we only had 10 players so to improve on a 2-1 defeat seemed very unlikely.

We needed a new plan.

I had been introduced to the idea of Gold, Silver and Bronze medal goals (or targets) and had used them myself or with others many times.

I decided to use gold, silver, bronze goals and I introduced them to the boys. I explained that a bronze medal was the minimum that we would be happy with, that a silver medal would represent something pretty good and that a gold medal would represent something special - a fantastic achievement that didn't come around very often.

I started by asking them, as a team, what would be their gold medal for the game today?

"To win", several of them said.

I felt this was highly unlikely. Impossibly so. I pointed out that we hadn't won all season, that we were playing the team at the top of the league, and we were a player short.

Someone said "to draw the game" and even though I felt that was also pretty impossible we settled on that. This was a gold medal after all and gold medals don't come very easily.

"What would be a silver medal?" I asked next. There was some discussion and we settled on "to lose by four goals or less". We had had some real drubbings so this seemed like a good silver medal target.

Finally, I asked, "what would be a good bronze medal target for us today?" There was a lot of discussion and eventually, with just about no input from me, the boys decided it was two things. Firstly, to keep trying throughout the whole game and, secondly, to not get cross with each other.

I thought these were fantastic because a) the boys had come up with them by themselves and b) because this target was in our own hands, in our control.

At half time, playing into the wind, we were losing 4-0. The boys came off the pitch looking a little dejected. I tried to raise the spirits by reminding them that we were on target for a silver medal and this seemed to help (they were too young or tired or incapable of extrapolating to work out this would mean 8-0 at full time).

In the second half we managed a rare attack into the opponent's half of the pitch and won a corner. One of the boys trotted off in the far distance to take it. They were still small boys and it was a big distance from corner flag to the goal.

The corner was taken and the ball came across in front of the goal and bounced past everyone until it got to a young lad on our team, Joe. Joe couldn't really kick a ball very well. But on this occasion the ball hit Joe's swinging leg on the shin and went in.

There were big celebrations. We rarely scored.

We were now losing 4-1 and, in all my time watching and playing team sport, I've never seen a team work as hard as they did for the rest of the match.

The game finished 4-1 and it felt like we had won the Olympics, never mind a silver medal.

Happy days.

*The idea of setting gold, silver and bronze goals - rather than a binary hit or not hit the goal - is a simple and powerful one.*

*I can be pretty terrible at setting achievable goals for myself. I get excited about big ideas and try and achieve whole projects in one go - and then get disheartened when I can't do it. An idea that is a good idea surely shouldn't take long, right?*

*When Jim first introduced me to the idea of tiered goal-setting using gold, silver, and bronze as targets, it really helped me accept that success isn't always black and white, or that I have to finish every big thing on the first go. When I get to the end of the week and reflect on what I have achieved, I try to consider whether the week has been one where I have overachieved (gold), achieved everything I needed to (silver), or had some setbacks but still managed to make progress (bronze). That in itself can make it easier to step away from work on a Friday evening, rather than trying to persevere until I am too tired to continue.*

How do you set goals and judge your success?

What do you take into account when you reflect on the week, and how does that help you leave work behind you for the weekend?

### **An example of how tiered goals helped a record-breaking swim**

I used gold, silver and bronze goals when helping Dom Boon prepare for a swimming challenge he'd taken on. Already an experienced open water swimmer Dom decided to take on the swim from Europe to North Africa across the Strait of Gibraltar. At 8.1 miles (13km) wide at its narrowest point the swim is especially hazardous because of the tides and shipping to contend with.

It was a big challenge for which he prepared hard and well.

Dom set himself gold, silver and bronze finish times and also made a detailed plan for both the run up to the day and the swim himself. He had a family member with him in a support boat.

He set gold, silver and bronze goals along the lines of:

- Bronze – follow my plan on the day – do the process
- Silver – do my plan and hit one of three target times (a gold/silver/bronze time)
- Gold – silver medal and enjoy the whole experience too

On the day, with great effort, he managed to deliver a gold – in what turned out to be a record-breaking swim. (As at 2023 he still holds the record.)

Having the three goals relieved some pressure and enabled him to target gold.

*Back when I was at high school, we used to get sent out in pairs for 'cross-country' runs around a loop of local pavements and footpaths. It was all fairly flat and gentle, but as someone who was perennially unfit, completely uninterested in running, and in all likelihood dyspraxic and with undiagnosed mild asthma, it wasn't something that I saw the point of at all. As soon as I was out of sight of the teachers, I would walk the course as much as my running partner would allow – and of course, I usually ended up going with someone else who was as enthusiastic about the situation as I was. I knew I risked getting into trouble, but I couldn't see any benefit to the discomfort and pain of*

*the run which was far worse for me than any punishment the teachers could mete out.*

*One day, the teachers asked us to really give it our best shot and for some unknown reason, I decided to try a bit harder than usual. Although I didn't run all the way, I knocked several minutes off my usual time.*

*It would have been really helpful to have tiered goals in that situation; mixing running and walking like a couch-to-5k programme, or setting timed goals to aim towards. I'm pretty competitive, so even though I hated running, I probably would have gone for it if I had something realistic - for me - to aim for.*

When would tiered goals have helped you improve or achieve something new?  
How could you use them to do something that you're proud of, even in difficult circumstances?

### **Extreme conditions might mean adjusting your goals and getting a better outcome**

I've never run the London marathon but I did go and watch it once. My younger brother Matt was running it, so as a family we went to support. I decided to go with him to the start before meeting up with the others later to watch him on the route.

It was an early start, but by the time we gathered with the thousands of others at his assembly point, there was already warmth in the blue April sky. At one point while wandering around, we passed someone, very prepared, putting some sun cream on the back of their neck and I remember saying to him later that if we saw anyone else doing that we might cadge some off them.

It turned out to be an abnormally hot spring day.

The race was sponsored by Aqua Pura and afterwards the story went around that some water stations had run out. When we met my brother at about the 18-mile mark, where they came back into central London from the fairly barren Isle of Dogs (at that time, the mid 1990s, parts of it were bleak), he was in a bad way.

He shouldn't really have been running at all having been ill with bronchitis about six weeks before – but he was keen to take part having done so much training. We bought him a bottle of water from a local garage and he managed to walk and jog to the finish.

It turns out that a temperature of 22.7C (72.8F) was recorded at St James's Park that day. Compare this to the average of 15.0C for that date in April and that all his training would have taken place in average temperatures lower than that.

Wind the clock forward 22 years to 2018. I knew three people, all coaching customers, taking part that year. All were well sponsored and wanted to run a good time too. However the

temperature that day turned out to be a new record high at a whopping 24.1C (75.3F), again recorded in St James's Park.

It turned out that the three had very different experiences.

One made no particular adjustment for the conditions, another decided that his bronze medal target time before the day was now his gold and the third decided that all bets were off, times were out of the window and he was just going to aim to run around and enjoy it.

Well, the first guy blew up, got overcooked and finished hours, literally, outside his original target times. The second guy finished outside his new gold target. And the third guy was pretty pleased with his run and was very satisfied with how it had gone.

Goals are something to aim for, but not always something to carve in stone (despite what people always say about never giving up).

*When I was in my first year at university, I played a lot of rugby. My family joked that I was studying rugby, not history! Between the university team and the local club, Tuesdays were my only day away from playing or training. Towards the end of the season, I broke a metacarpal in my hand during a game and was out for a month or so. Desperate to get back to playing as soon as I could, I started spending time in the gym to try and improve my fitness while my hand healed. One of the gym staff was an England Academy rugby player, and encouraged by my commitment in the gym, suggested I go to England open trials that summer.*

*Spurred on by the new goal, I kept at it in the gym, even after my exams were over. A few weeks before the trials, I went with the club team to play at the national Sevens tournament over a long weekend. The England Academy player joined us for the weekend, and I felt it was a great opportunity to get back into the swing of game situations ahead of the trials.*

*Unfortunately, and I have no idea why, I had absolutely nothing in the tank that weekend. Despite all the gym work, I was walking around the pitches feeling like I was wearing lead boots. The England Academy player and I had a brief conversation, agreeing that I shouldn't go to trials.*

*Although I was disappointed, I was glad to have had the chance to discover that I wasn't going to succeed at the trials before I went and potentially embarrassed myself. Whilst it was painful to give up on the dream of playing a higher level of rugby, it was the right decision and one I've never regretted.*

When have you had to confront an unexpected reality, and adjust your goals because things didn't work out as planned?

How did you cope with that change, and would you do things differently in hindsight?

**Knowing the environment can be extremely helpful**

I remember hearing Serena Williams talk about how much she loves Wimbledon. Not surprising since she has won the ladies singles title there seven times!

In the interview I heard I remember her saying two things about her knowledge of her surroundings that were helping her to be her best.

Traveling away from home as a professional sportsperson goes with the territory but is still another challenge to be dealt with. Another hotel room, more optimum food choices to arrange, how and where to relax. Serena explained that at Wimbledon she knew the area and had found a great private guest house to rent out that made life so much easier.

Secondly, she knew the tennis facility well and many of the people who worked there year after year at the tournament. If she was ever hanging around before practice or matches, and she wanted a quiet space to chill, she knew places to go.

These might seem like little things but “local knowledge” however gained, can be invaluable. Whether this comes from experience or by sussing things out ahead of time. As the military expression goes, “time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted”.

*One of the things I used to really enjoy doing during my time off was to go out and about with my camera. I love landscape shots and a friend recommended a really helpful app called ‘The Photographer’s Ephemeris’ – a map that allows you pinpoint any location, on any day, and see the line of sunrise, sunset, moonrise and so on from that point.*

*A couple of years ago, I had some time off just before Christmas and decided that as the weather was good, I would go into London and take some photos. After a little while wandering around the Millennium Bridge and St Paul’s under beautiful blue skies, I met a friend for lunch. Afterwards, she had a little time and I said that if she came with me, I could pretty much guarantee a good view of the sunset. So we wandered down to Embankment tube, picked up a coffee, and then went onto the footbridges overlooking the Thames and the Houses of Parliament. We timed it almost perfectly, and just as I was starting to feel I’d overpromised, the sun suddenly lit up the clouds over Westminster and the river before fading quickly into a dark December night.*

*Although I got a bit lucky with the sky deciding to perform (never a given), the time that I’d spent beforehand in working out where I might get the most picturesque sunset paid off. Of course, it doesn’t always work out quite so well in practice; a year or two after that trip, the app told me that the line of sunset would be roughly through Tower Bridge in late March before the clocks changed, about an hour or so after I finished work in central London. I planned my trip carefully, went over after work, and discovered that due to various buildings being in the way and there only being a limited number of vantage points to stand on the riverside looking back through the bridge, I couldn’t quite get the shots I’d envisioned. I still got some wonderful shots which I’m very proud of, but it was one time where my preparation didn’t quite go as planned!*

When have you found that doing a bit of groundwork has really helped you succeed?  
When could you do a bit more reconnaissance to really make things go smoothly?

### **Reducing pressure and stress by adjusting the goal**

I once knew a young man who worked in the same office as me. He was personable, likeable, hardworking, good at his job, a leader of his team and someone always looking to do better.

One day he explained to me that he was going to start doing some professional exams and asked me if I would be his mentor. Flattered, I said yes, though I wasn't too sure what I would bring. True, I had successfully studied for and passed quite a few exams, including while working full time.

Some months later, this chap - who was now onto module two - asked if he could have a word. He explained that he was struggling with everything that was happening. Work was busy, and he had recently become a Dad, so everything was pretty full on. He wasn't sure if he was going to be able to continue the study.

"Hmmm", I said. "That sounds tough". (I think I said something like this, but I'm probably telling this story in my favour, I'm not that naturally empathetic). "Tell me", I continued, "what mark did you get in your first module?"

"94%" he replied. I already knew the answer because he had told me before.

"And what is the pass mark?" I asked.

"40%" he answered.

"Ah", I said, and paused (cleverly).

"Ah!" he said. "I see what you mean".

We don't always have the option to reduce the goal or target to make life a little easier when we're struggling, but sometimes we do. And sometimes that's ok, either temporarily or more long-term.

When I was finishing my undergraduate degree, I took what was called a 'special subject' – an in-depth double-weighted course that spanned the full final year and counted for half of the year's marks. There were specific rules around what could be included in the final examination at the end of the year and which parts were only assessed by coursework. When the final exams were looming, the course cohort reached out to our slightly eccentric lecturer for some revision advice.



He called us all to his study early one morning, told us he couldn't remember which parts of the course he'd included in the exam and that he hadn't paid any attention to the rules around what could and could not be included, and then berated us for asking him questions. After this performance, one of the other students said that he would give it his best shot but wasn't too concerned as he felt that his grades were good enough across several other modules to get at least a 2:1, if not a first, via the university's preponderance method. This rule meant that if a student had received a certain grade across half or more of their modules in their final two years, they would receive that grade regardless of what they had scored in the remaining modules.

The lecturer had not been aware of this rule; he exclaimed it preposterous and accused the student in question of being lazy, cynical and a cheat – or words to that effect. He threatened to check it all with the university and the school of history as it couldn't possibly be an acceptable way to get a final degree grade! Yet of course it was correct and my fellow student was right to be so pragmatic as the final exam was pretty painful.

In this instance, my fellow student was taking a realistic approach at a difficult time. If this particular exam was going to be impossible to prepare for, he would do his best but not let it distract him from preparing for his other more predictable exams which were just as important to his final grade. He knew he had enough leeway from his existing hard work to mean that something really unexpected in the final exam wouldn't ruin his chances of the grade he was aiming for.

When have you had to take a pragmatic approach to your goals?  
What helped you make that decision, and how did you feel about it? Did it help?

### **Perspective makes a difference to the outcomes you are after**

Sometime after university I was job hunting. I had a couple of periods of looking. One was right after I had finished my PGCE but had decided teaching was not for me. I ended up getting a job in sports administration through a friend of mine.

The other time was a couple of years later. That first job had come to end, and I was doing various temporary jobs to pay the rent. I was signed on for a few weeks at about that time too.

At one point I was applying for some graduate jobs, not knowing what my chances were. So I was delighted to get a reply asking me to attend an assessment centre.

A week or two later I got a letter saying that they were sorry, but the graduate scheme was not happening that year and the assessments would not take place.

I was disappointed and a bit angry. I felt let down. Having calmed down, and talked to my Mum, I decided to ring them. I thought it would at least help to get my frustration off my chest.

As soon as the lady answered the phone things changed. Before I could say much she told me, very genuinely, how terribly sorry they were and how the company decision to not take on graduates that year meant she and her colleague would in all likelihood lose their jobs. Talk about having the wind taken out of your sails.

Suddenly my position was totally different. This lady was about to join me amongst the unemployed.

Situations and perspectives can change very quickly. Sometimes all you can do is accept something, dust yourself down, learn any lessons and go again.

*When I was very small, we had two lovely cats, Chaka and Sheba. My parents had got them a few years before my brother and I arrived on the scene, and they did very well to endure two boisterous toddlers – and a few years after this story, my little sister's arrival too. I absolutely adored the cats but as a fairly excitable small child, I rarely managed to approach them in a way that didn't scare them off.*

*One day when I was three or four, my Dad explained to me that they were frightened of me because I was so much bigger than them. He had me lie on the floor, and then stood next to me to show me how big and intimidating I must have appeared to the cats, and that because I was so much bigger than them I had to slow down when approaching them.*

*His advice must have worked because as I got a bit older, they became much more comfortable with me and would sleep on my bed. I've never forgotten the power of that lesson and how taking a cat's-height perspective on humans was so helpful in understanding what I needed to do.*

*It's a much more literal take on perspective than Jim's story!*

When have you found that taking a bit of perspective has helped you?

What did you change as a result?