SEVEN Bytes

WHEN YOU CAN'T SEE THE GOALPOSTS…

I have an app on my phone that keeps nagging me to get out and reach my steps target for the day, and another that reminds me to keep on at my futile efforts to learn another language. In every sphere of life, we are encouraged to set goals to give our lives purpose and direction, fulfil our ambitions, and create a sense of achievement and self-actualisation.

GOALS SUPPORT PERFORMANCE

Clearly, there's a lot of common sense in the approach, as expressed in the old maxim "if you don't know where you're going, you'll end up somewhere else". But there's also solid scientific backing – over sixty years of research and many hundreds of studies, both in the field and in the laboratory that have confirmed that setting challenging, specific goals leads to higher performance than instructions to "do your best" or not setting any goals.

That said, it's one thing for an experienced team operating in a familiar market to commit to increasing sales revenue by 10%, or for a well-prepared athlete to knock a second off her personal best. But what sort of goals do you set when you can't see the goalposts – for example for a new start-up venturing into a developing market, or for bright but inexperienced entrants, or even for a well-established business facing massive disruption from changing customer behaviour?

SPECIFIC GOALS VS LEARNING GOALS

In these unpredictable circumstances, setting specific goals to achieve a defined outcome (e.g. "increase market share to 21% by 31st December") may be counterproductive. Where tasks are novel and complex and when individuals are in the process of learning how to tackle them, setting specific outcomes to be achieved leads to even lower performance than telling them to "do your best".

This counterintuitive finding occurs because the specific goal tends to focus people's attention and efforts too narrowly on what worked in the past, so they persist in unproductive approaches and do not recognise the need to develop skills and perspective. Often, what is needed here is not an 'outcome' goal but a set of learning goals that look for optimum strategies to best tackle the unfamiliar tasks, often discovered through problem-solving or trial-and-error.

SMALL WINS LEAD TO BIG GAINS

Complex long-term tasks also need to be broken down into a series of proximal, short-term sub-goals. These can encompass learning goals – the strategies, knowledge, skills and behaviour needed to attain the end goal, and they can act as markers of progress, producing confidence-boosting 'small wins' on the way to distant goals, and providing feedback crucial for altering strategies and developing competence.

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PSYCHOLOGY AT WORK