# The Ultimate Guide to Goal Setting: A Science-Backed System to Set Goals that Work

In 2007, high school wrestling coach Pete Jacobson created a new set of goals. He didn't have much to lose.

Prior to that year, his school's wrestling program produced only one individual champion. Using a new goal system, the team produced six championship teams, two state champions, 11 all-state wrestlers, and 72 individual champions.

Everyone has goals. For some, goals include vague desires such as to make more money, lose weight, or meet a future spouse. For others, goals are more specific such as to grow sales to $1 million per year, lose 25 pounds, or get married by 35. Some will succeed, most won't. Why?

Most people set the wrong goals. At best, some goals do nothing. However, some goals can cause you to perform worse than if you had no goals. For example, a type of goal we'll discuss in this article that's been studied extensively by researchers called *avoidance goals* are "associated with fewer positive thoughts and greater negative emotions." Additionally, another type of goal studied by researchers that we'll discuss called *performance-oriented goals* can lead people to avoid seeking help and to be more vulnerable to failure.

Beyond the many types of goals we set, we must also consider the difficulty of our goals. Most goals aren't hard enough. Research has shown that easy or moderate goals don't produce any change in performance. But, there is a risk in setting goals that are too hard. Repeated failure to achieve certain goals can have serious negative consequences:

"Failure to achieve a goal can result in diminished self-efficacy, decreased satisfaction, and impaired future performance."

In some circumstances, the risk of failure to achieve a goal is catastrophic:

"One only need consider the phenomenon of learned nonuse after stroke, where repeated failure to successfully perform a task using one's impaired limb can lead to complete nonuse of the impaired limb…" (Ryan R. Bailey, PhD, 2019)

Most of us aren't trying to heal a limb after a stroke. But, we do want to make our lives better, feel happier, and try to make the world better. Goals are a powerful tool to create positive change. Because of the conflicting and confusing information about goal setting, it's essential to learn how to set goals that work.

In this article, I distill 31 research articles and other goal setting resources, 17 pages of notes on what's been proven about setting effective goals, and my own experience building companies and helping others do the same. The result is a system to set effective goals based on four key principles.

# Key Principle 1 of 4: Goals Make Your Life Better

Neuroscientist Elliot T. Berkman defines a goal as "a desired outcome that wouldn't otherwise happen without some kind of intervention."

If you don't want to change anything, you don't need any goals. You can wake up every day and do whatever you want. Life carries on with or without goals.

Some popular bloggers argue life is better without goals. One popular minimalism writer argues that goals are limiting and require you to do something you don't want to do each day. He says it's better to wake up and follow your passion. This is an interesting idea for a blog post, but it's not what research on motivation or the positive effects of goal setting supports.

Goals help us to create positive change in our lives. They also provide other benefits including higher motivation, self-esteem, self-confidence, and autonomy.

## A Life Without Goals

I've tried living without goals. At first, it's liberating. I get to do whatever I want. Then, the boredom sets in. I don't like watching too much television or spending a lot of time on social media. Instead, I read financial news or check the stock market. After one day of such a purposeless existence, I feel miserable. Something essential is missing.

There's a community of people who have worked for years for this level of freedom. It's called F.I.R.E., which stands for financially independent retire early. Most save a large portion of their income for years so that they can retire young. After reaching financial independence, most realize the same conclusion I have about a life without goals. For example, a blogger who goes by the moniker "Mad Fientist" talks about the "void" a job fills that's needed for a successful post-retirement life. On the first day after he quit his job he tried figuring out the meaning of life. That didn't go anywhere. So, he got to work on his blog, MadFientist.com.

Even if we have nothing we have to do, we must find something to do. We're wired to grow, learn, connect, and achieve. The right goals give us purpose. As Mark Twain once said, "Without dreams and goals, there is no living, only merely existing, and that is not why we are here."

## Goals Help Us Fulfill Our Basic Human Needs

Stanford neuroscientist and popular podcaster, Andrew Huberman, has said, "the continuation of any one species is the primary driver for any species."

Most of the goals we have aim to fill a basic need for survival and the continuation of our species. We also desire to feel important and to see how much we can grow. Maslow's hierarchy of needs include physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Later, psychologist David McClelland built on Maslow's theory of needs. McClelland says we have three motivators including accomplishing goals, having good relationships, and having influence over others. Self-determination theory suggests that we have three underlying human needs including control over our lives, community, and to develop skills to contribute something to the world.

These basic needs drive us as humans. We want to grow, thrive in our communities, be useful, and to feel important. Setting the right goals helps us realize our potential in each of these areas. Goals tap into our fundamental desire to improve. As Tony Robbins has repeated often, "progress equals happiness".

## The High Upside and Low Downside Opportunity in Setting Goals

A goal isn't the only, or even the most important tool, to create change. On your way to achievement, you also need to plan, motivate yourself to keep going, deal with setbacks, measure progress, and do what you can to manage your neurochemistry. But, the benefits of setting good goals are so great and the time required is so little, goals are the ideal place to start.

Research shows goals increase effort, persistence, attention, and planning. As such, a goal is one of the easiest tools to improve your performance. Most of the work is done upfront.

# Key Principle 2 of 4: Aim Higher - Set Harder Goals

Are SMART goals dumb? It depends on the interpretation of the A and the R.

Variations of the acronym's A include: assignable, achievable, actionable, and attainable. Similarly, the R has a few variations including the two most popular: relevant and realistic. If achievable, attainable, or realistic imply you should set small or moderate goals, you're wasting your time.

Psychologist and famous goal-setting researcher Edwin Locke found, "moderate goals are not predicted to lead to higher performance." Similarly, easy goals and "do your best" goals don't increase performance either. Only hard goals produce high effort and greater performance.

## Why Hard Goals Work

Recall Berkman's definition of a goal: a desired outcome that wouldn't otherwise happen without some kind of intervention. If a goal can be achieved without a change in behavior, it isn't needed. If you brush your teeth twice per day, you don't need a goal to brush your teeth.

Goals encourage us to create strategies to perform at the necessary goal levels. A hard goal requires a greater volume or higher level of effort in your actions.

Early on, I decided I wanted to make a lot of money. My early 20s dream was to be Forbes 400-rich. Because my goal was so high, I couldn't settle for pursuing small projects. Everything I did to make money had to have huge potential. I built a net worth of over $1 million by age 25. Although some of that was luck, I credit that achievement in-part to my high goal. Many others with similar opportunities and similar work ethic achieved far less or took far longer to get to the same milestone. Most of them that I know personally had smaller goals.

If you want to lose 15 pounds over the next year, you can do almost nothing and still achieve your goal. If you weigh 150 pounds and do nothing for ten months, you can still hit your goal, even if you *gain* 15 pounds. It's possible to lose 30 pounds in two months. It may not be fun. It may not be healthy. But, at least subconsciously, you know this is true. So, the small goal of losing 15 pounds in a year, or 1.25 pounds per month, doesn't change your behavior.

Alternatively, if you know you have a beach vacation in two months and you must lose 15 pounds, you take action. You cut out the soda. You start intermittent fasting now and stop eating junk food at night. You get your butt to the gym for an hour every day. The ambition of the goal requires more ambitious effort.

A small or mediocre goal leads to complacency and procrastination. A hard goal *requires* you to act vigorously now because you know there's no other way you're going to get it done.

## The Right Level of Goal Difficulty

How hard is too hard before you stop trying?

Locke, the goal-setting pioneer I mentioned previously, advised that organizations should make goals "very hard - even outrageous". He continued, "the more difficult the goal, the higher the performance of achievement."

Later researchers commenting on Locke's work said, "the conventional 'difficult' goals used to induce high performance in experimental goal research are set such that individuals have roughly a 10% objective probability of attaining the goal."

So, to maximize performance, should you set goals that you believe you have a 10% chance of achieving? Probably not.

If you set a goal so high you know there is no way you can achieve it, you won't do anything toward that goal. Additionally, if you repeatedly fail at goals that are too hard, soon you'll stop setting any goals.

Why does one of the most prominent goal researchers in history say you should set the biggest goals possible, while others, and our own intuition, tell us not to aim quite *that* high?

In 2003, researchers from Duke University, Stanford University, and the University of California at Los Angeles conducted a study to see how long participants would sit against a wall. One group received the easy version. In this version of the experiment, the starting point for the timer bar started 25% of the way to the finish line. It took 4.5 minutes to complete. The other group received the hard version which didn't start with a partially complete timer bar. For them, it took 6 minutes to reach the finish line.

Researchers found, as Locke predicted, the group with the harder goal did better *on average*. Some overachievers skewed the results. A few outliers sat on the wall far longer than most others. However, more people did better with the easier goal. The median moved higher. Does this mean you should set easier goals? No, it's evidence of a problem with giving the same goal to a group of people. What produces the best performance for the whole doesn't necessarily produce the best performance for each individual. This problem also exists in venture capital to the detriment of many entrepreneurs.

Venture capitalists expect most of the businesses they fund to not do well. Yet, many encourage founders to go for extremely high goals, try to disrupt industries, and raise a lot of money. It makes sense, for them. Venture capitalists know that most of their returns will come from only a few percent of businesses in their portfolio. Everything else they fund can go to zero if they're an early backer of the next Facebook.

But, what happens to an entrepreneur that owns a business not in the small percentage that does extremely well? The entrepreneur makes little money, has a business worth nothing, and has to start all over again. The average performance of all businesses in the fund means nothing to the individual entrepreneur.

Even if an "outrageous" goal might produce greater performance for a group of people, it might not produce better results for you. Very high goals get the most capable people to stretch further. Most others do worse.

If you give an olympic marathon runner and three weekend warrior amateurs a goal to run a marathon in under three and a half hours, the weekend warriors might push themselves. The olympian can coast for half the run. Alternatively, if you give the same group the challenge to run the marathon in two minutes and ten seconds, the olympian will push like crazy, possibly setting a personal record. The amateurs, seeing that this goal is impossible for them, will likely perform worse than if they had no goal at all. A near impossible goal gets the best performers to stretch, but causes most of the others to feel discouraged.

The solution is to set goals just beyond your maximum effort.

## Stretch Beyond Your Maximum Effort

When setting goals for a group of people, bigger is better. When setting goals for one person, such as yourself, just beyond maximum effort is best.

If your parents taught you to swim, you likely remember the frustrating experience. You jump in the pool to swim toward your mom with her arms open, waiting for you to arrive. Then, just as you get close, she backs away. "Just a little further. You're almost here." You paddle, you complain, you cry, but you keep swimming until you finally reach her. She congratulates you for the forced accomplishment. Your mom is stretching you beyond your maximum ability.

To set a goal with the right level of difficulty, first answer this question: "What could I achieve with maximum effort?" Don't settle for an easy or moderate goal. Be honest with yourself. If you *really* give this all you have, what could you do?

Most of us shoot too low. We're lazy and unfocused. We have to fight the urge to underachieve if we want our goals to work.

For example, I set my goal for jiu jitsu using this process. I was just promoted to purple belt five weeks ago, so my goal is to earn my brown belt by the end of 2024. Accomplishing this won't be easy. The highest level competitors can get promoted from purple to brown belt in jiu jitsu in one year. For everyone else, two to three years of training at least three times per week is typical. Today, I'm mediocre at best. For me to have a chance at getting promoted to brown belt 15 months after receiving my purple belt, I have to train at least five to seven times per week, be able to submit most purple belts at my school, not get injured, and, likely, win a gold medal at a prominent competition. This goal feels just beyond my maximum effort. Perfect.

When you set your goals, aim higher. Tailor your goals to your individual starting point and ability. Determine what you could accomplish with maximum effort, then make your goal just beyond that.

## Key Principle 3 of 4: Pursue Only One to Two Major Goals

Easy and moderate goals don't work. Hard goals require a lot of time and effort to accomplish. Therefore, you can't pursue many goals at the same time. One to two goals is ideal.

In the final section of this article you'll learn how to create a plan to make it more likely you'll achieve your goal. For now, you only need to understand a key implication of that process:

"...implemental planning draws attention to **the difficulty of executing multiple goals, which undermines commitment to those goals** relative to other desirable activities and thereby undermines goal success." (Too Much of a Good Thing, Dalton, 2012)

More goals is not better. Your greatest results will come from working on only one or two goals at a time. I discovered the power of having only one goal in Hawaii in 2017.

My stomach was in knots. I was sitting in a tiny helicopter with no doors 700 feet in the air. My instructor mistakenly thought I was getting comfortable and decided to show me what an engine failure felt like. The first thing that happens is you drop 15 feet in about one second. Then, you glide down to the ground without the power of the engine. I signed up for over 40 hours of this discomfort.

I was burnt out in business. We'd built a company from nothing to $32 million in annual sales, seen sales drop by 72%, had to fire half the company, then revived it to a healthy position. I needed a break. So, I decided to fulfill my dream of learning to fly a helicopter

After four and a half weeks of 12-hour days flying and studying I passed my checkride. I was officially a licensed helicopter pilot. The encouraging words from the main instructor upon giving me my license were, "Congratulations. We've just given you a license to kill yourself. Be careful."

The average time to get a private pilot license for a helicopter is six to eight months, assuming you don't quit. Some students start training already knowing how to fly a plane. Others seem to at least know the main parts of a small engine. I knew nothing. I still barely know the purpose of a carburetor. Yet, you have to learn the major parts of the engine, weather patterns, and how to talk to the control tower before you earn your license. The only reason I was able to earn my pilot license in four and a half weeks versus the six to eight months it normally takes is because it was my only goal. Other than spending time with my wife, I did nothing else for that time in Hawaii other than fly and learn about helicopters.

You'd be amazed at what you can accomplish when you have only one goal. You'll get even better results when you set the right type of goal.

## Set Approach Goals

To start, it's better to set approach goals as opposed to avoidance goals. Approach goals move you toward a desired activity; avoidance goals move you away from an undesired activity.

For example, let's say your goal is to eat healthier. You could aim to quit eating junk food at lunch, an avoidance goal. Or, you could aim to eat a healthy salad for lunch, an approach goal. The latter approach goal is likely to be a better strategy.

"Approach goals are associated with greater positive emotions, thoughts, and self-evaluations and greater psychological well-being. In contrast, avoidance goals are associated with fewer positive thoughts and greater negative emotions." (Ryan R. Bailey, PhD, 2019)

When setting your goals, think, "What do I want?", not, "What do I want to avoid?"

Next, learn to enhance the effectiveness of your approach goals by combining them with two additional goal types proven to increase performance.

## Use Performance and Mastery Goals

UCLA Coach John Wooden won ten college basketball championships in a 12-year period. His teams won a record seven championships in a row. In three seasons, his teams didn't lose a single game. In three other seasons, performance dropped - Wooden's Bruins lost one game in each of the 1968, 1969, and 1971 seasons.

For a coach who won so many games, you'd think winning was Wooden's main focus. Yet, he said, "You never heard me mention winning… My idea is that you can lose when you outscore somebody in a game, and you can win when you're outscored."

Wooden produced his incredible record by focusing on the processes likely to produce winning teams. He knew that if he did everything he could to prepare his team for games, the score would take care of itself. Wooden planned every minute of every practice. He worked his teams hard so there was never any downtime. He made sure his teams would never be out-hustled in a game. Wooden even taught new players small details such as how to put on socks properly to prevent blisters. Wooden aimed to master the practice of coaching and for his players to master the game of basketball.

To make a big improvement in your life, it helps to know where you want to go. You need to know the outcome you want so you know where to direct your efforts. However, the processes you use to produce that outcome are more important. Often, if you master the details, the outcome takes care of itself.

Wanting a specific outcome, such as winning a basketball game, is a performance goal. To seek to be the best you can be or to learn a specific skill is a mastery goal, also called a learning goal.

Typically, performance goals focus on doing better than others such as placing in the top 10 of your age group in a 10K race. A goal that requires you to demonstrate your superior performance to others can drive higher performance. However, such a goal can also produce negative outcomes such as the desire to avoid looking dumb, and thus fake competence, to pursue a success-by-any-means approach, and to lead to complete effort withdrawal, also known as quitting.

My jiu jitsu goal is to earn my brown belt by the end of 2024. This goal is clear, specific, and easy to measure. It's likely to motivate me to work harder over the next year. However, accomplishing it is not in my control. There isn't a specific standard to meet, promoting me is up to the discretion of my coach. Another problem with this goal is that even if I achieve it, I may not accomplish what I really want. My real goal is to get better at jiu jitsu. A belt is an indicator, but not proof, of skill. The only way I get better at jiu jitsu is to master the techniques and mental aspects of the sport. The belt is my goal. But, paradoxically, if I am going to have any chance at earning it, I must forget about it and put all of my attention on the process of mastery.

In contrast to performance goals, mastery goals involve learning and developing as much as you can for yourself. For example, instead of focusing on finishing in the top 10 of your age group in a 10K, you focus on developing the best, most energy efficient running form possible. In jiu jitsu, I can focus my effort on learning new techniques and improving weaknesses. Such mastery goals are associated with positive outcomes such as interest, enjoyment, and challenge-seeking.

According to the research, to produce the best performance, it's best to use both mastery and performance goals. Humans are wired to compete for resources. Therefore, it's natural for us to perform better when we subconsciously feel our lives are on the line. Even if it's an amateur local 10K race, we feel like we've won a small victory for our tribe by performing well versus the other racers. However, due to the negative possible consequences of fixating on performing well compared to others, it's good to not make this type of goal your primary focus.

Instead, you'll likely get more enjoyment and long-term benefits from focusing on mastering the processes that lead to the outcome you want. Soon, you'll learn how to combine these goal types together to create the best possible results.

## The Process or the Outcome

In 2009, researchers wanted to see what type of goals would lead to the greatest adherence to an aerobic exercise program. The first group focused only on Outcome Goals such as losing nine pounds in six weeks. The second group focused on Process Goals such as "maintain your heart rate above 140 beats per minute for 30 minutes of your 40 minute session" or "drive with the legs on the rowing ergometer". The third group, the Control Group, had no goals.

The prescribed aerobic exercise program consisted of three sessions per week at an intensity of 60-75% VO2 max for longer than 20 minutes at the local fitness club. Researchers measured participants adherence to the program using the fitness club's swipe card system. There were three monitoring periods: (1) six weeks (18 sessions for 100% adherence), (2) three months (36 sessions for 100% adherence), and (3) six months (72 sessions for 100% adherence).

In all three monitoring periods, the No Goals group under-performed the two goals groups. At the end of the initial six-week intervention period, the Process Goals group completed 92.22% sessions on average while the Outcome Goals group completed 78.52%. At three months post-intervention, the results began to vary widely. The Process Goals group completed 78.70% of sessions while the Outcome Goals group completed only 44.63%, barely outperforming the No Goals group. At six months post-intervention, the Process Goals group completed 66.57% of sessions while the Outcome Goals group completed only 41.94%. Once again, the Outcome Goals group did about the same as the No Goals group.
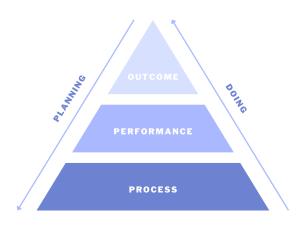
Researchers concluded, "...it appears that focusing on the exercise behavior itself via process goals elevates exercisers' intrinsic motivation…Setting process goals for exercises may enable them to enjoy exercising in the present, as opposed to focusing on what exercise may do for them in the future."

Additionally, those with Outcome Goals rated themselves lower on perceived choice (autonomy) and higher on pressure/tension (stress). Process Goals led to more exercise sessions well beyond the intervention periods and greater positive feelings.

Approach, mastery, and process goals work best. Additionally, including a goal that involves performing well as compared to others can help further increase performance. Now, let's put this all together into a coherent goal setting model.


## Three Layers of Effective Goals

## GOAL PLANNING PYRAMID

A common goal setting model includes three components: Outcome, Performance, and Process Goals.

Outcome Goals are the end result you want to achieve. You usually have the least control over your Outcome Goal.

Performance Goals in this model are personal achievement targets likely to get you to your Outcome Goal. For example, if your Outcome Goal is to win a 10K race six months from now, a Performance Goal might be to run a 10K on your own in under 45 minutes. You have more control over this goal because it's not dependent on other racers.

Process Goals are the daily or weekly actions you can take to achieve your Performance Goals. You have total control over your Process Goals which might include showing up to the gym three times a week, saving 10% of your income, or posting on social media three times per day to grow your business.

These three layers of our goal setting model give us the model we need to create goals that drive our lives forward. Now, let's create your goals using this system.

## Outcome Goals

First, clarify the outcome you want to achieve. Examples of possible outcomes include: lose weight, grow sales, win a race, get a promotion, decrease debt, win an award, get a new job, or grow your social media following.

Make sure the outcome you want is specific. Ideally, assign a date and quantity to it. Don't choose "lose weight", choose "I want to lose 18 pounds by Christmas".

## Performance Goals

Second, determine a few specific Performance Goals likely to create the outcome you want. If your goal is to grow your business's sales to $600,000 per month, you might include 100,000 monthly website website visitors and 5% website visitor-to-lead conversion rate as Performance Goals. If your goal is to have zero debt, you might include reducing your monthly expenses to $4,000 as a Performance Goal.

For some Outcome Goals, it might not be easy to come up with Performance Goals. For example, if you want to lose 18 pounds by Christmas, there aren't many individual achievements, other than losing the weight, that contribute to that goal. In this case, you can skip straight to Process Goals. However, you might consider changing the Outcome Goal. A better Outcome Goal might be to lose 5% body fat by Christmas. To do so, losing 18 pounds might be a good Performance Goal that's likely to contribute to that Outcome.

## Process Goals

Third, determine the specific processes you can do to achieve the Performance Goals and Outcome Goal. Processes include the actions you can follow regularly to improve your ability to achieve your goals.

For example, to achieve your Performance Goal of 100,000 monthly website visitors, you could do the following:
- Post one high-quality video per day on your YouTube channel
- Ensure every video you post has a specific call to action leading people to your website
- Review the performance of your YouTube videos every week to plan how to improve future videos
- Publish one in-depth, high-quality, SEO-optimized article on a top relevant to your business each week
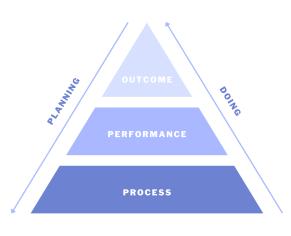
To determine the best Process Goals, think about what is most likely to get you to your Outcome Goal and Performance Goals. What daily or weekly actions can you do that, if done well, will create the results you want?

Process Goals can and should include mastery elements. If you want to lose weight, you might aim to get better at cooking healthy food or doing a sport you enjoy such as yoga. If you want to get out of debt, you might aim to learn as much as possible about personal finance or get good at being self-sufficient by learning how to do basic maintenance on your house or car. While

your main aim begins with your Outcome Goal, you are likely to find you get much more joy and fulfillment from the process to achieve your goal than from its attainment.

## Using the Three-Layer System to Plan Your Goals

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The three layers of goals are in order from least to most control. Outcome Goals are often dependent on others and are out of our control. For example, my business partner's wife had a goal to place in the top three of a fitness competition. Then, the pandemic happened and the competition was canceled. She didn't have control over that outcome. You have some control over Performance Goals. If you set a goal to be able to run a mile in five minutes, that's mostly within your control. However, you could tear your ACL playing soccer and not be able to run for a while. Process Goals offer you the greatest control. Even if you're injured, if your Process Goal is to get to the gym every day for 60 minutes, you can still get to the gym and do something. In planning your goals, you start with that which you have the least control over to that which you have full control over.

Start with one to two Outcome Goals you want to achieve. Then, determine two to four key Performance Goals likely to get you to that Outcome Goal. Lastly, determine three to six Process Goals you can do on a daily or weekly basis to achieve your Performance Goals.

To work on your goals, work from the bottom up. As you work on your daily or weekly Process Goals, you should get closer to achieving your Performance Goals. As you achieve your Performance Goals, you should get closer to achieving your Outcome Goals.

Once your goals are clear, the final step is to create a plan to follow through.

## Key Principle 4 of 4: Create an Implementation Plan

In 2011, researchers sent a mailing to thousands of employees overdue for a colonoscopy. The mailing gave details about the procedure and how to schedule an appointment. In addition to the standard mailing, one group received a yellow sticky note with a prompt to write down when and with whom their colonoscopy would take place. After seven months, the group with the simple plan-making prompt was 16% more likely to schedule the procedure.

The act of writing down goals makes the achievement of them up to 50% more likely. However, to maximize the likelihood that you get the outcome you want, plan when, where, and how you will implement your Process Goals. Researchers call these implementation intentions.

For each of your Process Goals, decide when, where, and how you will follow-through. In the example I gave previously about growing business revenue by increasing monthly website visitors to 100,000, I listed the following as the first Process Goal: Post one high-quality video per day on your YouTube channel. Here's what an implementation intention could look like for this Process Goal: On Mondays from 8:00 a.m. to noon, I will plan, record, edit, and schedule the release of seven YouTube videos for the week.

By planning implementation intentions for your Process Goals, you uncover additional steps you need to take, such as blocking off time in your calendar. You can also uncover potential problems that could derail your progress. Therefore, the final step is to plan a few if-then statements to deal with potential roadblocks.

For example, you may have an emergency that pops up on a Monday which prevents you from recording YouTube videos that day. You don't want that to keep you from publishing any videos for the entire week. So, you create a backup plan in advance such as "if an emergency or important appointment ever keeps me from recording videos on Monday, I will block out that time and record on Wednesdays from 8:00 a.m. to noon". Now you know to keep your schedule on Wednesday mornings light. If anything ever happens that prevents you from recording on Monday mornings, you have a backup option ready.

## Putting It All Together: A Research-Backed Goal Planning System

Here is the six-step research-backed goal planning system:
1. Pick one to two big Outcome Goals, specific changes unlikely to happen without significant effort and attention

2. Make sure each goal you set stretches you beyond what you currently believe you could accomplish with maximum effort
3. Use approach goals that move you toward desired outcomes or activities, not avoidance goals that move you away from undesired outcomes or activities
4. For each Outcome Goal, create two to four Performance Goals that give you specific, measurable targets to achieve that make it likely you will realize your desired outcome
5. For each Outcome Goal, create three to six Process Goals that provide you the daily or weekly activities you need to do to accomplish your Performance Goals
6. Create a written implementation plan that details when, where, and how you will do your Process Goal activities as well as if-then contingencies to prevent getting derailed on your progress

As powerful as goals are, they are only one tool to improve your life. Eventually, you have to do the work, deal with setbacks, stay motivated, and find a way to remain focused despite inevitable distractions.

Yet, you need good goals if you want to create the best life possible. Research has shown goals not only help us better achieve what we want, but also help us fulfill our basic psychological needs. We must set the right kind of goals to get the full benefits.

A goal is "a desired outcome that wouldn't otherwise happen without some kind of intervention" (Berkman). Easy and moderate goals don't increase performance. Only hard goals help us close the gap between where we are and where we want to be. Choose goals that are slightly beyond what you could achieve with maximum effort.

Achieving hard goals takes a lot of work. You first create Outcome, Target, and Process Goals. You then create implementation intentions, including if-then contingency plans. Therefore, you can't pursue more than one to two goals simultaneously. There isn't enough time, willpower, or mental bandwidth available.

Ideal goals include measures of specific performance and mastery-focused processes. You want to know exactly where you're going. Yet, fixating on your desired outcome won't get you there. You need specific processes to follow on a daily or weekly basis to build the skills, experience, and habits to achieve your desired outcome. Most of your attention should be on these processes. You'll get better results and will be happier while pursuing your goals.

You are much more likely to achieve your goals with this system. However, it doesn't guarantee you pursue the *right* goals. Some successful leaders don't believe it makes sense to work backward from any goal.

In 2005, Paul Graham, co-founder of Y Combinator, the startup incubator behind Airbnb, Stripe, and DoorDash wrote an essay to high school students. He said, "It's not a good idea to have fixed plans…instead of working back from a goal, work forward from promising situations. This is what most successful people actually do anyway."

You could set a goal to build a $100 million business in 10 years. You could work backward to figure out the types of businesses that get that big. Then, you could study that industry and, possibly, even work in it for a few years. Or, you could build from the best opportunity you find today and move as quickly as possible. Many of the world's top companies found their success by following unexpected opportunities. Twitter was originally a text message platform. Virgin Airlines was conceived by Richard Branson when his flight from Puerto Rico to the British Virgin Islands was grounded.

Making the best decisions you can - and seizing opportunities - based on today's realities is a pragmatic approach to decide the outcomes you pursue. However, once you decide on an outcome, you're more likely to realize it if you have a system to follow built to close the gap between where you are today and where you want to be. That's the purpose of the approach to goal setting you've learned in this article. You give yourself the best chance to achieve your desired outcome that wouldn't happen otherwise.

Use the power of good goals to create what you want in life for yourself and others. The risk is too great to not choose your own destination. As Yogi Berra said, "If you don't know where you are going, you mind wind up someplace else."

-Matt Clark, 2023

**Resources:**
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25. https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.565202/full
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