

Setting your Goals and Reaching Them

Would you turn up at an airport with your luggage and passport but without having decided which country you plan to visit? A mystery plane trip might be exciting, but how will you cope without your swimming things in the West Indies, or your comfortable shoes on a city break?

Unless you know where you want to get to, it is easy to do lots of interesting things without feeling that you are getting anywhere, much less where you would like to be.

Setting your own goals also helps with focus (deciding what to do and what to leave for later) and motivation (investing your energies in getting to where you want to be).

What do goals look like?

There are two main kinds of goal: the visionary and the practical. The best place to start is deciding how far ahead you want to look. Some people like to look ten years ahead or more, and think about the whole of their life including their career path, the kind of person they want to be, their important relationships, and how they will spend their time. Others prefer to think in much shorter time-frames, maybe a year or even a semester. Sometimes your perspective may be as short as the next assignment.

So the first thing is to decide how far ahead you want to look. Once you have learnt how to use goal setting you can come back and revisit your goals for a different time-frame. The important thing is to feel comfortable with what you have chosen.

Your visionary goals relate to your overall time scale, while the practical ones will be the steps and stepping stones along the way.

Make sure you write down your goals as this will set them more clearly in your mind and help you to be more committed to them.

Visionary goals

You can set goals in a number of areas of your life, or just in one. At BU you might want to focus at first on achieving the best possible marks for your assignments, or you might want to take a longer view and set a goal for the kind of work you want to do after graduating, or even longer lifetime goals. Whatever the timescale you choose, you might want to think about family, friendships and relationships, about exercise, about long-term career goals, about money and finance, about your contribution to society, as well as about learning and education. If you think about a number of areas rather than just one then your goals and your life will be more in balance.

The first time you use this process you might prefer to concentrate on one area and a short time scale, and then be more ambitious in your planning as you understand the process and have used it successfully.

When you are thinking about your visionary goals, ask yourself these questions:

- How clearly can I visualise what this success will look and feel like? Visualising success will help your motivation to achieve it.
- Is it really my personal goal, and not something my parents or friends think I should do? If you are not fully personally committed to this goal, you are much less likely to be motivated to achieve it however well you plan.
- When do I want to achieve this by? Having a timescale is essential when you come to work out the specific steps.

Start by making a list of ideas for goals in each of the areas you have chosen, and then prioritise them so you have one or two key goals in each area.

Practical goals

Think about each of the main visionary goals you have set, and work out a few key steps on the way and their time scale. If you start with a timescale of a year, try thinking first in terms of six months, and then three and nine months, and then separate goals for each month. Then plan the first month in terms of what you need to achieve each week, then each week think about what practical actions you will take each day. If your overall timescale is longer, perhaps a few years, you might need to look first at the half way point, then at the two quarters, and then a yearly breakdown followed by smaller sections until you reach the point of planning the first month, weeks and days.

Some people find the planning part very easy, but then find that the practical part, actually doing things, much more difficult. That is why you need to make the plan for the first month very clear and practical so it is easy to check off your progress. Make the steps and actions as small as they can be, such as making a phone call or appointment, so you can clearly see success and progress.

Other people are perfectly comfortable with doing things but struggle with the planning process. Unless you do the planning and decide what it is that you need to do to achieve your goal, you risk doing random things that may be interesting but will not help you achieve your goal. You may find it easier to revisit your planning often rather than trying to achieve it all at once. Make sure you have the overall staging posts in place, and fill in the detail for the next section as frequently as necessary.

As a result of this planning you should know what you want to achieve overall, and what you will do today and this week to achieve it. These are your To Do list and marking off these as you complete them will give you a quick sense of progress and achievement.

The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step (Chinese saying used by Chairman Mao Tse Tung of China).

We can achieve less in a day than we think, but more than we think in a year.

Smart Goals

It can help in setting goals to check whether they match the SMART standard:

S – Specific: is it a general aspiration, or something clearly identifiable?

M – Measureable: is it phrased in such a way that you can tell whether or not you have completed it?

A – Attainable: is it something you can realistically be expected to do?

R – Relevant: does it link and contribute to achieving to your overall aims?

T – Timebound: have you been clear about when you will complete all the steps?

- Ask yourself these questions about each target:
- Is it positive? I will... rather than I will not...
- Is it precise? Then you will be sure when you have achieved it.
- Is it significantly within your control?
- If you have more than one goal, which are your most important ones? Then you will know how to prioritise.
- Are your practical goals small? Then each will be easier to complete and you will have more opportunities to celebrate success.
- Is it your own goal, and not someone else's idea about what you could or should do?
- Is it realistic but stretching? Something you really want to do and could achieve if you commit to it?

Once you begin to work on a goal, a number of unanticipated things may get in the way. You may realize that you need to develop more skills than you thought, or there may be obstacles you did not expect, or your circumstances may change. Then you need to do two things:

- Think about what you have learned from this experience that you can take into your future planning;
- Work out what changes you need to make either to your visionary goals or your practical planning to make success possible.

Learning from goal setting

Did you achieve your goal very quickly? Then you might want to make the next one more challenging.

Did you find your goal harder to achieve than you expected? Then you might need to make your next goal a bit less challenging, or to break it down into smaller steps.

With what you now know about yourself and goal setting, do you need to revise your other goals or your action plan?