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MEANINGFUL GOALS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

by

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of "meaningful goals" through a review of the literature. Definitions, attributes, and criteria of goal setting are considered in some depth. Weaknesses and strengths of the information contained in the literature are examined, and a framework for creating and maintaining meaningful goals is presented.

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Introduction

The concept of goals seems to be omnipresent in our society. Every year on the first of January people are encouraged to create resolutions, goals for improving one's self in the new year that are often based on external factors; organizations routinely produce performance expectations, externally imposed goals for workers and society; and people struggle to figure out how to transform their dreams into reality, sometimes giving up completely in the process. Society seems to be immersed in goals, but how many of these goals are "meaningful"? How many goals does one create or accept because of a deep, internal desire to achieve the intended result?

This paper briefly explores the psychological literature for information about "meaningful goals": what are they? How does one create, or accept from an outside source, a "meaningful goal"? And, perhaps most importantly, how does one achieve a "meaningful goal"? To accomplish this end, this paper will briefly consider definitions present in the literature and attributes of goals. It will also develop several criteria for creating (or accepting) meaningful goals and consider the question of maintenance – how does one maintain progress toward a goal, thus guaranteeing (as much as one is able) that one will eventually attain the goal?

Since the goal, or "desired ending", for this paper is to have sufficient knowledge to develop a program for creating, maintaining, and achieving meaningful goals, it will need to explore various psychological models for goals, comparing the outcome with criteria developed in the early parts of this paper. It will also need to determine if there is sufficient evidence to support a new model against the extant literature.

Definitions

Goal

Burton, Naylor, and Holliday (Singer, Hausenblas, & Janelle, 2001, p.497) introduce their definition of goals by saying "William James prefaced his classic definition of attention by saying 'Everyone knows what attention is' (1890, p.455). It is tempting to define goal setting in a similar way." It seems that many psychologists have succumbed to that temptation because a definition of "goal" is difficult to find in the literature. It seems that the common definition, "what one is trying to accomplish" (c.f. Singer et al., 2001, p. 497), is what most psychologists assume to be the definition of goals.

While this is one definition of what a goal is, it is most certainly not the only one. Burton et al. (Singer et al., 2001, p. 498 - 99) list two disparate concepts for what a goal is. The first is simple enough, "direct, specific motivational strategies" (Singer et al., 2001, p. 498) and is very similar to the "common definition". By their first definition, goals serve to "focus attention and improve efforts" (Singer et al., 2001, p. 498). The second definition, also called "goal orientation", is "predispositions for participation based on underlying motives for what individuals want to attain and accomplish ..." (Singer et al., 2001, p. 499). In this definition, goals are not *objective* measures of accomplishment but rather *subjective* measures of satisfying a want or need; thus one may create objective goals to satisfy the subjective goal orientations, and even if the objective goal is not met the effort will have been considered a success if the subjective goal has been met. While not identical, these two concepts are "highly complimentary" (Singer et al., 2001, p. 499) and do provide some evidence for the concept of "goal depth", which this paper will explore below.

Meaningful Goals

“Meaningful goals” are hinted at in the general literature by the emphasis on values and interests that some authors place on goal setting (Koestner, Lekes, Powers, & Chicoine, 2002; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Singer, Hausenblas, & Janelle, 2001; Cox, 2002), however there is no explicit definition on what a “meaningful goal” is.

Dream

If the literature seems to be lacking a definition for “meaningful goals”, then a definition for “dreams” (other than that of the nocturnal state) seems to be entirely lacking. Some authors include “fantasies” in their analysis (c.f. Oettingen, Pak, & Schnetter, 2001b), however “fantasies” does not seem to fit into what this author considers a “dream”.

Constraints

The final model (and definition) of goal setting must have several attributes to be considered for our purposes: depth, proximity, duration, focus, specificity, valence, collectivity, coherence, complexity, hierarchy, and difficulty (Cox, 2002, pp. 90 - 92; Koestner, Lekes, Powers, & Chicoine, 2002; Singer et al., 2001, pp. 506 - 10). Of these, depth and duration are not considered in any of the reviewed materials. Complexity and hierarchy are implied, however they are not explicitly discussed in any of the reviewed materials.

*Goal Attributes**Depth.*

A goal has depth if it is particularly meaningful to the person making the goal. Depth appears to be addressed in part by the concept of goal orientations (above), however this author is not convinced that the concept is addressed in full by those authors. Depth requires the consideration that motivations are complex, with each motivation being influenced by one or more needs, desires, goals, and/or dreams. Deeper goals influence a larger number of goals than those with less depth.

Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs (c.f. Franken, 2002, pp. 15 - 16 for one overview) does lend support for the component of depth, however, as Maslow and other needs theorists posit that some goals are more important than others and thus will take priority in a conflict. This is an important consideration if one is to consider coherence (below).

Proximity.

Proximity refers to the amount of time that an outcome requires to attain. According to the literature (c.f. Singer et al., 2001, pp. 506 - 10) a goal that is closer in timeline is easier to attain than one that is more distant, which is an important component for complexity (below).

Duration.

Where proximity refers to the amount of time that a goal will take to accomplish, duration refers to the amount of time that the goal will last once it has been attained. Many readers will consider this to be subsumed in "proximity" above, however there is a subtle difference. Consider two goals: "run a marathon in September", and "live in Japan for two years starting two

years from now". The goal for running a marathon will take several months to prepare for at the least, however this event will only cover one day. On the other hand the goal of "living in Japan for two years" will last two years from the start of the goal's attainment. Both of these are significantly different than, say, running a 100-meter dash or getting a raise at work – both of the latter goals have an extremely limited duration.

Focus.

Focus refers to the type of outcome that is desired. Used primarily in a sporting context, a goal's focus can be process focused, performance focused, outcome focused, or some mixture of the three. Process goals refer to goals that concentrate on "improving form, technique, and strategy" (Singer et al., 2001, pp. 506), performance goals refer to goals that deal with improving overall performance (Cox, 2002, p. 90; Singer et al., 2001, pp. 506), and outcome goals refer to a specific desired outcome (Cox, 2002; Singer et al., 2001). A baseball player that has a goal to improve his batting stance has set a process goal, but if the same player has set a goal to improve his batting average to .500 he has set a performance goal. Winning the national championships would be an example of an outcome goal.

Cox (2002, p. 91) makes particular note that a goal with multiple focuses (using a "multiple goal strategy") is more effective than a goal with only one focus. While this may be counter-intuitive at first, it does lend credence to the hierarchy concept (below). In the example above, for instance, the player may have a goal to improve his batting average to .500 by improving the quality of his batting stance. The improved average may be part of his goal to help his team get to the playoffs and win the championship. This method would help with self-esteem issues since process and performance goals are predominantly under the control of the athlete, whereas outcome goals are largely under the control of others (e.g. teammates, competitors).

Specificity.

The literature is consistent in stating that specific goals are more effective than general goals (Cox, 2002; Franken, 2002; Koestner et al., 2002; Singer et al., 2001). Indeed Koestner et al. (2002) posit that this is one of the major mistakes that hold people back from achieving their goals.

Unfortunately being specific about one's goals is an anathema to abstract goals. As an abstract goal, "I want to be a loving person" defies specificity. No matter how specific one tries to be, one can never cover all of the specifics of being a loving person; no matter how large the list of specifics gets, there will always be more specifics to add to the list. That said there is a definite place for specificity in abstract goals even if one cannot create detailed lists. In particular, one should be careful about the language one uses when creating abstract goals. For instance, the goal "I want to loose weight" is neither specific nor meaningful. Does this person wish to be healthier, more attractive, or both?

Specificity also includes the common practice of setting a date that one wishes to achieve the goal by.

Valence.

Goal valence is an "avoid/attain" concept (Singer et al., 2001, p. 509). When one specifies one's goals as what one wishes to attain the valence is said to be positive, but when one specifies what one wishes to avoid the valence is said to be negative. Neither myself nor Singer et al. (2001, p. 509) were able to find any studies regarding goal valence, so this is an area that clearly needs to be researched.

Collectivity.

"Group/team goals are objectives established for the collective performance of a group or team" (Singer et al., 2001, p. 510). The notion of collectivity specifies whether a goal is an individual goal or one for a group of people.

Coherence.

There is ample evidence in the literature that goal coherence, that is setting goals that are consistent with one's values and interests, is important to goal attainment (Franken, 2002; Koestner et al., 2002; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001). Ironically enough, there does not seem to be any discussion by these authors on the role that needs play in goal setting; though it seems that "needs" should belong with coherence attributes along side interests and values I was unable to find any mention of this in the literature.

Complexity.

Complexity is not explicitly noted in the literature that was reviewed, though one may consider this to be a subcategory of "difficulty" (below). Complexity refers to the number of steps and the depth of hierarchy required to attain a given goal. This differs from difficulty in that a complex goal is not inherently difficult, nor is a difficult goal inherently complex.

Hierarchy.

As noted above, there is some implicit evidence for a hierarchy in the goal setting process, however this author has not found any explicit mention of the concept. Singer et al. (2001, ch. 15) present a hierarchical model for motivation based on a three tiered model, however this model is not directly applied to goals.

Hierarchy considers the links created when one realizes that some goals require one to attain large or abstract goals as several smaller, more concrete goals which themselves may need to be broken down into several smaller, more concrete goals. While many sources consider the need to create smaller goals as a means of attaining larger goals (c.f. 2002; Singer et al., 2001, pp 506 - 10), and some authors have considered overarching goals as a fundamental process of human behavior (c.f. Franken, 2002; Solso, 2001), it seems that no one has linked the two concepts.

Abstract goals seem to be quite common and often result in smaller, more concrete goals as a means to attain the end. For instance, someone who wants to become healthier may set goals for weightlifting, aerobic exercise, and diet, however these individual goals are strongly linked to the goal of being healthier. One expects this deeper goal to moderate all three goals, and to create additional behaviors as necessary, however the literature does not seem to contain any serious examination of this linkage.

Difficulty.

Difficulty is one of the most commonly considered attributes of goal setting. Goals should be difficult but attainable (c.f. Koestner et al., 2002).

Goal Setting Methodology Requirements

While it is apparent that there are a number of "holes" in the current literature, several requirements for creating an effective and appropriate goal setting methodology did emerge. The structure of the goal, meaningfulness, the plan, goal priority, goal confidence, and self-esteem are important to consider for a method of setting and achieving goals. In particular Koestner et al.

(2002) posit that the goal's structure, personal meaning, and plan are the main reasons that people fail to meet their goals.

Structure.

"People often structure their goals poorly" (Koestner et al., 2002) by setting too many goals, adopting conflicting goals, or create goals that are too ambiguous, difficult, or too far away from accomplishment "to serve as useful behavioral guidelines" (Koestner et al., 2002).

"Considerable evidence indicates that specific, proximal, and optimally challenging goals are the most likely to yield success" (Koestner et al., 2002).

While Koestner et al. do not consider the notion of hierarchy in their article, it seems clear from his analysis that an optimal goal setting methodology must consider the layers and links of a person's goal creation mechanism. Koestner et al. seem to dismiss the notion of abstract goals as a foundation, presumably because there is no structure to link the various layers in a useful fashion, so one may conclude that the hierarchical aspect of goal setting requires more research.

Personal meaning.

Koestner et al. (2002) propose that people do not sufficiently consider the reasons why they are making their goals in sufficient detail. According to the article, people too often make goals for "external reasons such as social pressure or because of expectations of what they should do" (Koestner et al., 2002). For a person to put energy into a goal it must have some internal importance to them.

The literature makes special note of the role of self-concordance (Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005; Karoly, 1999; Koestner et al., 2002; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001; Singer et al.,

2001), ensuring that the intended result is coherent with one's values and interests. The two things that seem to be missing from this statement are dreams and needs. Indeed needs will generally create a strong interest (c.f. Franken, 2002, pp. 15 - 16) in a person so needs may be considered a third type of interests, albeit a very important one.

Plan.

According to Koestner et al. (2002) the third reason that people fail is because they fail to plan properly. They recommend creating "specific implementation intentions", an automated response for how to accomplish one's goals. While this is laudable, the specificity can detract if one is not careful. Imagine, for example, someone who decided to write every morning between 6:30 am and 7:30 am. In theory this one decision, to write every morning at a given time, prevents one from needing to decide when to write. Unfortunately reality will often get in the way. What happens, for instance, when our writer goes on business travel and works long, unpredictable hours for two weeks? Or what if the plan requires waking up at 4 AM, but his work schedule changes unpredictably to prevent that?

This experience, extensive planning that does not predict actual circumstances, is one of the foundational experiences of the martial arts. Typically a martial artist learns forms designed to teach principles of realistic combat. Martial arts instructors know that these forms will never be used, as taught, in actual combat, however they also know that when practiced long enough with the right attitude these forms can be internalized in a such a way that the practitioner does not need to consciously plan or respond to a threat; the appropriate behavior has been internalized even though there is no way to practice every specific situation.

In Japanese this concept is called "Shu Ha Ri". Roughly translated as "hold, break, leave" (Wikipedia, 2005), "Shu Ha Ri" refers to a process whereby one learns principles by first sticking precisely to a strict form. Once one has learned the form, one can progress to experimenting with it (when does it work? When does it not work?) and eventually one internalizes the principles that are being taught. At this point the person no longer needs the form; abstract concepts have now become reality for him or her in a useful way.

Shu Ha Ri has come to be used in ways that the martial arts community had never considered (Fox, 1995). While this application has not been researched, implementing goal intentions with the principles of Shu Ha Ri seems to be a promising notion. If one creates implementation intentions not with the intention of carrying them out with precision but with the intention of internalizing strategy, the implementation intentions should become more flexible and consequently more useful (Wikipedia, 2005).

Priority.

People have priorities in their lives and this must be taken into account for an effective goal methodology. It can easily happen that two goals conflict (c.f. Koestner et al., 2002), and in that case the person must have a way to easily determine how to resolve the conflict. If the goals are concrete portions of a larger or abstract goal then that person can make an evaluation based on the "big picture". If the two goals are unrelated, some methodology must be in place to resolve the conflict. This requirement is strongly related to personal meaning; it is expected that these priorities will be based on values, interests, and needs as well as hierarchy.

It is here that the notion of "dreams" becomes important, even without a literature definition. One should make decisions about goals based on which "dream" is more important

and in accordance with one's values. If other interests are placed above one's dreams, then one will find one's self in a position where one's dreams are not being realized. It is one of the few conclusions about dreams one may make with the current state of the literature.

Control.

A goal setting methodology must consider the amount of control that a person has over whether a given goal can be attained. Thousands of athletes enter the Olympic games every four years and most, if not all, strive to "bring home the gold" yet only a select few can do so. This is an outcome where the individual can exert very little control; they may continue to enhance their performance and hone their process, but in there are many variables that are outside of their control. People tend to set goals in a realistic fashion and then strive for them in an optimistic one (Taylor & Gollwitzer, 1995), so the methodology must take this into account.

Goal confidence.

It is important for a methodology to consider how believable that a given goal is to the one that sets it. If a person does not believe that they can attain a goal, they are much less likely to put their energies into the goal than if they believe the goal can realistically be accomplished (Oettingen, Pak, & Schnetter, 2001; c.f. Singer et al., 2001).

Self Esteem

There is evidence in the literature that attaining goals, especially those based on interests and values, results in enhanced self-esteem (Judge et al., 2005; Koestner et al., 2002; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001). While this is an important factor to consider when creating a goal setting methodology, dealing with disappointment should also be part of the

methodology. One important technique that arises from sport psychology is reflecting on one's accomplishments when one faces defeat (Cox, 2002; Singer et al., 2001). An Olympic athlete, for example, that did not place in the games can take comfort knowing that he or she accomplished a lot simply by being a competitor.

The multi-focus strategy noted above is appealing, in part, for reasons of self-esteem. If a methodology encourages goals that have several focuses, one can gain an enhanced self-esteem from achieving those aspects that are within their control, and comfort from accomplishment when considering those aspects that are not.

Feedback.

Outside of the self-help literature, very little exists on the notion of feedback. How does one monitor one's progress in attaining goals? Cox (2002) maintains that feedback is important; one must monitor one's goals and analyze the progress made toward attaining them. In particular, Cox (2002) notes that one should keep a log of one's progress, in an objective manner if possible. Weight lifters, for instance, can keep a log of the weights and repetitions that they are doing each day or each week.

Summary

The literature provides evidence that meaningful goals are easier to attain than those that do not have meaning to the one creating the goal. Of these meaningful goals, "dreams" may provide the most focus for energy however additional research is clearly needed. In any event, it is clear that goals that are based on dreams, values, and needs are more successful than those that are not since, dreams are those things which one is the most interested in accomplishing.

Structure, planning, meaningfulness, setting priorities, confidence, and self-esteem are all important considerations for any goal methodology. Of these considerations, planning seems to be the most difficult. If implementation intentions are created in accordance with the principle of Shu Ha Ri the implementation intentions may be more effective in that this method can compensate for the unpredictability of life, however this aspect needs much more research. The methodology used should encourage setting goals that have several focuses, including at least process and performance goals.

The methodology should also encourage the user to evaluate their goals in a holistic manner, considering dreams, higher level and abstract goals, priorities, and the connections between them. Concrete, proximal, optimally difficult goals should result from this process with clear links to dreams, values, and needs. A hierarchy of goals and sub-goals should emerge, with priorities and a clear vision of where the goal setter wishes to go, why, and how.

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