

Coaching at Work

Bath Consultancy Group

May / June 2007

VOX POP

GOAL-SETTING:

In his feature for the March/April issue of *Coaching at Work*, "When own goals are a winner", Anthony Grant stressed the importance of goal-setting while urging practitioners to be flexible. Meanwhile, in our Research Matters column, David Megginson called for more research to be carried out into the role of goals and predicted an increased focus on their downside. On the following pages are some of your comments – and Grant's response



Much of the previous issue was dedicated to goal-setting, and this sparked unprecedented response from readers as it whether it is always helpful or essential. Here's what you thought

Mike Kitson

NLP master practitioner, Dove Nest Group



Anthony Grant raises interesting points, although some of the ideas upon which the article is predicated are

somewhat suspect – for example, that "people who set avoidance goals tend to have higher levels of depression and lower levels of well-being".

NLP uses a series of motivational factors known as meta-programs; these include whether people tend to see things in small chunks or large chunks (detail or big picture), and how we all relate to time (in-time or through-time). A major area within meta-programs is the natural tendency for some people to move either towards or away from goals, which Grant calls approach and avoidance goals.

I have not come across anything in NLP that links "away from" with psychological ill-health as Grant implies. In fact, many "away from" people are the hardest-working and most driven people you can find. They tend not to stop working simply because they never know when they have reached a destination.

A case in point is the actor Michael Caine, who appears to be a classic "away from" person. Caine has spoken publicly about his deprived childhood in the East End of London and how a fear of going back to deprivation and poverty is his driver to work. He will probably never

stop working, as he will never know when he is safe from slipping back into poverty.

I also struggled with Grant's view that finding the adaptive behaviours associated with a goal and concentrating on these could be seen as "Machiavellian". Grant apparently fails to recognise humanistic counselling and therapy and the direct links to coaching, where the coach views a person holistically rather than labelling them or fitting them into any particular theory. Is it underhand and sly to help the client to achieve their desired goal?

There may be a difference between where the organisation and the individual want to end up, but any and every mode of assistance – including a knowledge of motivation theory, psychological drivers, and value systems – should be used to help all parties to get the best outcome possible.

Mike Amos

Head of coaching, Chiumento

Goal-setting can be a valuable part of the coaching process, but we should avoid the "one size fits all" approach.

For example, specific goals framed in terms of the desired outcome can be helpful in performance coaching, whereas in developmental coaching the desired outcome may be expressed in broader terms, at least at the outset, with specific goals becoming clearer only as the coaching progresses.

HOW USEFUL IS IT?

Goals can certainly help, but they can also restrict effective coaching. The important thing for the coach is to follow the interest of the person being coached, stay on their agenda and live with some ambiguity.

Ted Campbell

Director, executive 21



I have been trained, as most coaches are, to believe in the value of enabling clients to articulate the goals they want to achieve.

However, on several occasions this has been a fruitless task, as the client has had little or no energy to set specific goals. This has led me to be confused about the whole goal-setting process and to believe that it is not the straightforward process I imagined it would be.

I now think goals should encompass a whole spectrum of outcomes, from the relatively vague to the highly specific. With this in mind, goals should be formulated in alignment with the energy and motivation of the individual. However, this strategy needs to be balanced with those – perhaps more specific – outcomes that the organisation might require.

Gil Schwenk

Principal consultant, Bath Consultancy Group



Goals or dialogue? This is a good example of the classic "either/or" split that often comes up in supervision.

Shall I do this or that?

Goals and outcomes are the lifeblood of coaching. Coaches are employed by individuals/organisations to help individuals to

move from the current situation to a desired reality. Human beings are goal-seeking organisms. Our organisations, economies and political systems are based on goals. Without goals, how could we possibly build a case for the value of coaching?

On the other hand, we are not human doings but human beings. Dialogue is an essential ingredient of collaboratively being together in our organisations, society and the world. Robust coaching dialogue is generative, enabling the client to think more fully and deeply than they could by themselves.

Consequently, it is "both/and". Dialogue helps to create goals that come from the client's "heart" with passion and motivation to achieve.

David Megginson

Professor of HRD, Coaching & Mentoring Research Unit, Sheffield Hallam University



I have come to think that goals can be inhibiting, unnecessary or irrelevant. This used to worry me as people

such as Anthony Grant, John Whitmore, and Berg and Svabó all said that goals were at the heart of coaching. I wondered whether it was just me who was the bad coach, who didn't know how to use them properly. Yet when I looked more deeply at the literature, I found that although it was mostly unequivocal in its support for goals, there were exceptions. Writing from other fields reinforced my view that goals may not be an unalloyed good.

My enquiries into coaches' struggles with goals indicate I may not be alone in my concerns. I have gathered data via a short open-ended questionnaire and from focus groups. Here are some evaluative comments made at one

such group during a Sheffield Hallam research day:

- Goals can limit what is covered and prevent broad development.
- Goals are linked to business needs as opposed to the individual's.
- If coaches insist on goals, will this stifle "natural" coaching/mentoring/developing?
- Do goals act as a crutch/excuse to avoid what would be painful/beneficial?
- Goals can close the door on emergent opportunity/serendipity.
- Goal-setting can be profoundly destructive to the coaching process.
- Goals are often predetermined and redefined by the third session.
- Does the need for measurement demand excessive focus on goals?
- Preset goals are usually vague and shift over time for everybody.

My fieldwork indicates that the concerns about goal-setting in coaching and mentoring are:

- Goals tend to be specified by organisation representatives, not the client. This can diffuse motivation and create conflicts of interest.
- Goals stifle the agenda and limit development. Clients can restrict themselves by sticking to the goals that they set at the start.
- Goals can be a crutch or a distraction, preventing the addressing of bigger concerns. Coaches, too, can collude in discussing an organisationally legitimated agenda at the expense of not exploring other issues that, while painful, could be beneficial.

Some members of the group said they used goals sometimes, to good effect. Direction, purpose or focus was widely considered necessary even by those with the most reservations about goals.

Anthony Grant does highlight some of the dangers. I am not making black-and-white statements here; just stating that there is a shade of grey. »