

GOAL SETTING - THE AGILE WAY



OWN GOAL...



Whether it's getting healthy, advancing in your career, or going on an adventure, many people tend to leap into goals and never see them through. Just look at my attempts to join the gym...

So, I started to look at ways to improve my ability to select goals, start them, and most importantly, stick to them.

And I found that many of the techniques suggested in the realm of goal-setting have parallels or overlaps in the world of Agile software development.

GOAL SETTING

Choose (wisely)

Evaluate

Break it down

Start!

Prioritise

Share

Measure – retrospect – celebrate

Iterate and experiment

Here's what will be covered. There are several approaches, techniques and tips here, some more closely aligned with Agile practices than others. Hopefully, some or all will be useful to you in your own quest to set better goals!

WHY CHASE A GOAL AT ALL?



CHOOSE-EVALUATE-BREAKDOWN-START-PRIORITISE-SHARE-CELEBRATE-ITERATE

To begin with: Why have a goal at all?

For me, it's about happiness. By setting goals for yourself, you are asserting control over part of your life.

You are expressing a desire for autonomy, and giving yourself purpose. And hopefully, as you progress towards your goal, you will start to feel a sense of mastery over this subject.

And as shown in Self-Determination Theory, or the book "Drive – The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us" by Dan Pink, Autonomy, Purpose, and Mastery are the three traits which drive your feelings of intrinsic motivation to complete a task.

And as your motivation grows, you find your levels of autonomy, mastery and purpose increase too, in a happy little feedback cycle.

So, in short - why set yourself goals? Because it makes you happy.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD GOAL?

- Improve Health
- Invest in social network / relationships
- Increase curiousness
- Learn something new
- Give to others

CHOOSE-EVALUATE-BREAKDOWN-START-PRIORITISE-SHARE-CELEBRATE-ITERATE

A white paper called “5 ways to wellbeing” was the result of a recent mental health study in the UK. This paper suggested that people who devoted more time in their lives to these 5 areas – improving their health, investing in relationships, increasing curiousness, learning something new, or helping or giving to others – experienced a boost in psychological happiness and robustness, as a result.

So, when it comes to choosing your goals, find ones that have something in common with one or more of these areas.

Note that this applies to goals in your personal life as well as in your professional life: while it may not seem it, all of these areas are relevant to goals you may set for yourself in the workplace. Goals such as developing your career, building your network, mastering a particular technology.

CHOOSE WISELY



- What vs. why
- Extrinsic vs. intrinsic
- Too many vs. not enough
- Too easy vs. too difficult
- Complexities and consequences

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There are “what” goals, and there are “why” goals. The first only describes an endpoint – “I want to write a book”, “I want to lose 2 stone”. There are two problems with “what” goals. First, they don’t consider any progress made up to the point of success. The achievement is stated as a binary choice, so all the work you do up to the point of succeeding is therefore failing. This is a pretty demotivating approach! Second, when a goal is described purely in terms of the outcome, it’s harder to tell part-way through whether you’re really on the right track. Instead, “why” goals focus on the journey, rather than the destination. Understanding why you’re pursuing a particular goal helps you to recognise your progress as you go, and helps you to gauge whether you’re progressing in the right direction at every step.

The difference between extrinsic goals and intrinsic goals is the difference between needing to do something and desiring it. Extrinsic goals are tasks, generally delegated to you from elsewhere, for which you have no intrinsic desire to complete. Intrinsic goals come from a personal desire to achieve something. Of course, it’s possible for these two areas to overlap, and it’s also possible for you to buy into an extrinsic task, finding the intrinsic motivation to complete it. But it is useful to be able to distinguish one from the other.

Too many vs. not enough / too easy vs. too difficult – the balance is different for everyone, but suffice it to say that you want your goals to be challenging. That’s where the satisfaction of achieving them comes from. A goal that is too easy may not be satisfying, but equally, you need to be able to complete a goal without needing a miracle! Figure out where your limit is – and then perhaps take one or two steps beyond...

Finally, spare a thought for the consequences of introducing new goals into your life. These may be positive or difficult consequences, but just be aware of what changes you may have to make to your routine before you commit hard to achieving a goal. This will help you to avoid becoming unstuck further down the line.

EVALUATE



CHOOSE-EVALUATE-BREAKDOWN-START-PRIORITISE-SHARE-CELEBRATE-ITERATE

How do you decide which of your carefully crafted goals is the most important?

You could go with the most pressing, or easiest to start, or even the one that looks like the most fun!

But here's another option. Think about your personal values – write them down. Score how well your goals align with these values. The goals with higher scores will provide a better return on your personal time invested!

BREAK DOWN!

- New habits
- Waypoints



CHOOSE-EVALUATE-BREAKDOWN-START-PRIORITISE-SHARE-CELEBRATE-ITERATE

Big aspirational goals are great, but can be daunting. You need to break them down.

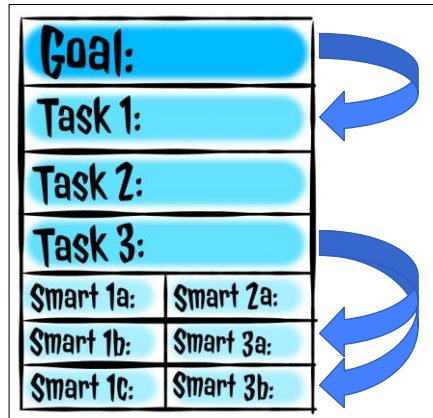
How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time!

Create new regular tasks that nibble away at your goal.

Define waypoints to measure your progress by: these could be a deadline you've imposed on yourself, an external event in your calendar, or a sub-goal that feeds into your main goal.

Most big goals can be reached via a combination of these.

DEFINITION OF GOAL



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Consider a Goal to be like an Epic or a User Story. As an Agile practitioner, our first instinct is to break down the requirement.

The Goal (or User Story) is high-level, vague, defined in terms of a desired outcome, not a specific solution. For example, “Be a better communicator”.

Break out Tasks for goals as you would break out implementation details for a User Story – these are more specific statements about how you intend to meet the requirement. For example, “Start a blog” for written communication, or “Present at a conference” for spoken communication.

Tease out some measurements or SMART tasks for how you'll achieve these tasks. These are akin to acceptance criteria for the User Story – they are concrete, binary checks about when and how a task will be completed. These could be new habits or waypoints - for example, “Publish a blog post every month” (as a new habit), or “Present on the subject of Goal Setting at the BCS Mini-SPA conference”.

You end up with a plan that is much easier to visualise in terms of real actions and progress.

HABIT FORMATION

- Design a recurring task
- Make it repeatable
- Make it easy to succeed – at first
- Associate it with a trigger
- Behaviour changes mindset
- Break bad habits the same way!

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Some interesting insights about forming new habits.

Natural habits are formed when the brain sees a pattern of trigger -> action, and forms an automatic behaviour around it. We're all Pavlov's Dog.

Design a repeatable task with a strong trigger to fool your brain into thinking it has formed a habit. Then repeat, repeat, repeat.

Make the task easy, focused, hard to fail – make the bar to complete the task as low as possible. Example.

Behaviour changes mindset - not the other way around. You can't will a new behaviour into existence!

Break bad habits using the same approach – identify the habit you want to alter, figure out the trigger that leads to that behaviour, and intervene!

GO!



CHOOSE-EVALUATE-BREAKDOWN-**START**-PRIORITISE-SHARE-CELEBRATE-ITERATE

Starting can be easier said than done. Procrastination, delay, and distraction are the enemies of starting.

The good news is at this point, with a set of crafted, evaluated, planned out goals, you've mentally already done a lot of the work to beat the procrastination demons!

Another psychological phenomenon that is helpful - the "implementation intention". This is a way to convince your brain that you're serious about starting.

Think of a commitment – this forms a weak intention to implement.

Say it out loud – this forms a stronger intention. Write it down – stronger. Sign it – even stronger.

“Start starting to start finishing”!

LIMIT YOUR WIP!

- Be Agile!
- Be ruthless
- MIT



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Your own time is the most precious resource that you have. Prioritisation is key.

In Agile we understand that limiting your WIP is the best way to deliver consistently and predictably, and not allow too much work to build up and swamp us.

Warren Buffett suggests that you need to be ruthless. Take your 25 life goals, reduce them to 5 – throw the remaining 20 away. Don't allow them to distract you.

MIT – Most Important Task. This is a micro, day-to-day level goal planning technique. It asks you to focus on achieving one important task every day.

GO PUBLIC



CHOOSE-EVALUATE-BREAKDOWN-START-PRIORITISE-**SHARE**-CELEBRATE-ITERATE

Sharing your goals can be a powerful motivator.

There are arguments for and against. The argument against suggests that telling everyone your big, aspirational goal can lead to the opposite of the "implementation intention", by convincing yourself that you have done more than you have towards achieving this goal. This can lead you to take your eye off the ball...

So, you need to pitch at the right level. Share the right goals with the right people. Share SMART goals – these are far more concrete and short term, so they're much easier to enforce. Share goals with people you trust and respect – or even better, someone you will allow to hold you to account.

A good example is the gym buddy. You both have skin in the game – neither wants to let down the other. In my workplace, I have a similar setup – the scrum buddy. The principle is the same – you allow your buddy to hold you to account, and continually ask if you are doing the things you said you would do.

TAKE THE WIN!



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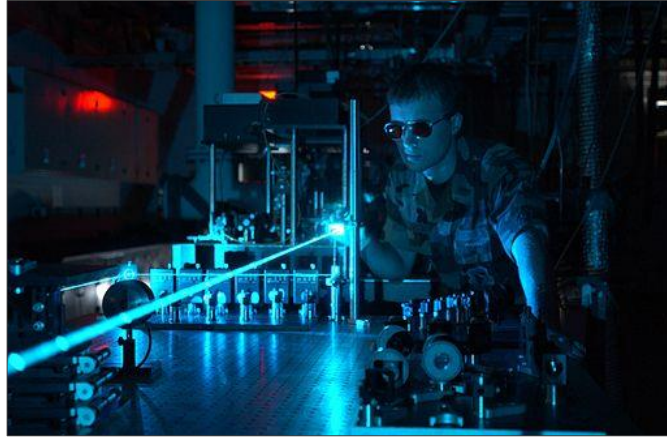
Keeping up your energy and dedication can be difficult when faced with big goals with unclear or no endpoints.

Measurement, retrospection and celebration are key. Agile recognises this in the retrospective ceremony. It's a regular point at which you stop, examine your progress, and reflect on the good and bad of the previous iteration of work.

By reflecting on and recognising your progress, it is possible to identify and celebrate your ongoing achievements. So, do this often with your progress towards your goals. It will help to keep your achievements relevant and in perspective, and boost your motivation to continue.

In the games industry, the "level up" mechanic provides just this celebration – a little dopamine hit to keep you playing even when progress seems slow or the endpoint seems far off.

EXPERIMENT



CHOOSE-EVALUATE-BREAKDOWN-START-PRIORITISE-SHARE-CELEBRATE-**ITERATE**

Experimentation, inspection and adaptation are key parts of the feedback cycle in agile development. They allow us to course-correct often, and ensure we keep working in the right direction.

You may not find the best way to achieve your goal the first time. Or that your habits are not forming. Or that your habits or waypoints are not taking you in the right direction.

Just as in agile development, the journey towards our goal is never a straight line – it will always zigzag. By understanding the “why” of the goal, you will be able to determine whether your current position or direction is useful or relevant to you. And if not, change something. Keep iterating.

REAPPRAISE



CHOOSE-EVALUATE-BREAKDOWN-START-PRIORITISE-SHARE-CELEBRATE-ITERATE

Ultimately, your situation may change. Your priorities may also change and your motivations too. So, it's reasonable to assume that your long-term goals may change too.

While on your journey, you should be aware of whether your direction is towards or away from your goal. But if it's away - and you're happy with that - then cool. Understanding the "why" and focusing on the ongoing progress, not the destination, will help you understand whether your direction is relevant to you, and whether you have done enough.

Just as in agile development, we recognise that working on a project is only valuable to us while the requirements are unmet, and still relevant to us. If either of these things change, we stop work on that project and start on one that is more valuable or relevant.

So, recognising when you're done enough, or that you want to change your goal is good. Carrying on towards a goal you no longer want is bad. It won't make you happy.

FROM THE TOP

- Select the right goals – figure out the most valuable ones
- Big goals are good – but you must break them down into workable chunks – make a Definition of Goal
- Start starting to start finishing – and limit your WIP!
- Share your goals, and have someone hold you to account
- Measure your progress. Retrospect on it. Celebrate it!
- Inspect and adapt – and know when to course-correct

THANK YOU



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RESOURCES

[Eric Barker - How to be more self-aware](#)

[Eric Barker - Building good habits](#)

[Farnam Street - Habits vs. Goals](#)

[Jim Kwik - Kwik Brain](#)

[How to set the Right Goals - 7 goal setting mistakes to avoid](#)

[Michael Hyatt - Goal Setting](#)

[TED talk - Derek Sivers - Keep your goals to yourself](#)

“Drive: the surprising truth about what motivates us” – Dan Pink

“Think Small” – Owain Service and Rory Gallagher

“The Power of Habit” – Charles Duhigg

Interesting and useful links:

<http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2017/06/how-to-be-more-self-aware/>

<http://www.bakadesuyo.com/2017/07/build-good-habits/>

<http://jimkwik.com/kwik-brain-010/>

<http://jimkwik.com/kwik-brain-015/>

<https://www.farnamstreetblog.com/2017/06/habits-vs-goals/>

<http://www.lifehack.org/404034/how-to-set-the-right-goal-7-goal-setting-mistakes-to-avoid>

<https://michaelhyatt.com/goal-setting.html>

https://www.ted.com/talks/derek_sivers_keep_your_goals_to_yourself

<https://getpocket.com/explore/item/forget-about-setting-goals-focus-on-this-instead-468387533>

<https://heleo.com/conversation-how-to-finish-everything-you-start/17207/>

<http://www.danpink.com/pinkcast/pinkcast-1-2-a-simple-trick-for-getting-the-right-stuff-done/>

Books:

“Drive” – Dan Pink

“Think Small” – Owain Service and Rory Gallagher

“The Power of Habit” – Charles Duhigg

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