

Anything but a blueprint

As a motivated student and human, I often established goals for myself — along with step-by-step plans of action for reaching them — whenever I found something new to strive for. I believed heightened focus and clarity would come as a result of my preemptive planning — which in turn would theoretically better equip me to conquer the work ahead. Foolproof, right? Wrong. I've found these supposed blueprints for success only serve to do the opposite, wrecking both my productivity and joy via the restrictions that are inevitably part of them. So I stopped following them. Here's why.

When I set a goal for myself, I set it hard — really hard. Like, planning-for-months hard. During the COVID shutdown (my sophomore year of high school), for example, I spent three months planning out how I was going to ace the SAT. I researched the different methods of studying, sifting through hundreds of blogs' recommendations for the best textbooks, tutors, and online prep services. Needless to say, it's easy to look back and see my time would have been much better spent had I just picked a prep book and started working through it. (Hindsight's a cruel thing.) My tendency to overplan and overcomplicate, combined with the principle of vicarious goal fulfillment, makes for a very pernicious combination — one that often grinds my progress toward my goals to a halt.

Vicarious goal fulfillment, as coined in the 2009 study by Keith Wilcox and crew, is the tendency to view goal-setting as progress toward the goal itself, which subsequently causes the goal-setter to indulge in the very thing they vowed to improve upon in establishing their goal. In the context of this study, it was found that participants who made a resolution to eat healthier were more likely to indulge in comfort foods when presented with a healthy option: Their mere consideration of the healthy option when combing over their choices was enough to make them

feel as if they'd made progress toward becoming healthier snackers, so more often than not they ended up choosing to reward themselves for such "progress" with a treat.

Since outlining a plan can be a long and laborious process for me, I'm often exhausted before I've even started making progress toward the goal itself. That I expended so much energy in just the planning phase exacerbates the feelings inspired by vicarious goal fulfillment, my exhaustion further validating that false sense of achievement. This excuse is too much for my tired self to ignore, and I begin to think, "I worked hard to make it this far, and my effort shows I have what it takes to [insert goal here]. Since I know I can do it and I'm pretty tired, why not just stop here?"

This was the case with my (prep for) SAT prep. After spending three months figuring out which study materials I wanted to buy, I didn't study for the rest of the summer — not one hour. I wasted hundreds of hours worrying about how I was going to study, and when I finally sat down to start, I couldn't. I was burned out before I'd even begun. Only when school started up again did I realize I'd made no progress toward my studying goal, which stressed me out and made me feel the need to catch up. These side-effects further hindered my ability to study. Which leads me to the next pitfall that comes with goal-setting: the overjustification effect.

The overjustification effect occurs when extrinsic sources of motivation are introduced as an incentive to complete a task that is already intrinsically enjoyed, causing the external reward to wreck the innate desire to perform the task. This can then lead to decreased enjoyment and performance while engaging in that task.

Some days, I'm randomly struck with an idea. Excited, I furiously scribble the thoughts flying through my head onto a napkin, hoping to catch each one before they flit away. Normally these ideas are coding projects I want to work on, inspired by an article I read or a topic recently

covered in class. For instance, one of my project ideas was to create a recycling-near-me app (recycling isn't a very accessible option in my hometown), which would allow the user to input their location and find directions to the recycling center closest to them.

Having fleshed out the basics of what I wanted to do — the formatting of the UI, the languages to use, blah blah blah — I crafted one of my infamous over-the-top plans. I specified what I wanted to accomplish by when, as well as exactly how I'd go about it. Only to forget about it for a while due to a busy week of classes — and then come back to find I'm already behind schedule. Instead of being excited to start building the app, I was overwhelmed by all the tasks in front of me and stressed by the pressure of the deadlines I'd appointed. In seven days, I'd gone from being stoked to start coding to dreading even thinking about the requirements and restrictions I'd laid out for myself.

This was not an isolated incident. It's happened many times, in much the same way. And it always ends the same: I never complete the project. Because I let my lame, annoying plan get in the way. Because, rather than letting my passion carry me, I burdened myself with expectations. My intrinsic desire to work on the project was there — I wouldn't have been so excited in the first place if it weren't — yet I felt the need to incentivize myself further. I didn't trust myself to get anywhere without a goal and plan to guide me. But these metrics I constructed became the enemy of achievement, supplanting my excitement with expectation. I was no longer doing it because I wanted to do it, because I'd enjoy working on and learning from it, but because I felt obligated to check off the next task on my to-do list in time. In this way, I corrupted each and every one of my passion projects and reduced them to a restless grind... and accomplished nothing but stress-induced headaches along the way.

No good can result from establishing goals. At best, you reach the goal and stop there, capping your potential. There is not enough room in your mind for both intrinsic motivation and a goal. Though you create a goal out of an intrinsic desire to reach some milestone, it reframes your perspective in a way that ultimately poisons that desire. Whenever you work toward a goal, you're now thinking about hitting some objective rather than enjoying the process, about completing rather than doing.

In this way, goals become an antithesis to the passion that inspired them, a gradual erosion of your intrinsic motivation till only an itch to get the goal over with remains. So, upon completing the goal, this itch leaves you and, with it, any fire to keep going, to keep learning. But what if you let yourself explore your interests and desires freely, without a goal to get in the way? Then you would no longer be bound by the magnitude of the goal, but by the extent of your inspiration and will to immerse yourself in your vision.

I took the SAT four times. The first three times, I told myself I had to get a certain score by a certain date by studying specific topics in a specific way. I failed to get my desired score every time. The fourth time I took the SAT was my last chance — it was the fall of my senior year — yet the pressure I felt while taking it was lower than it had ever been. Because I'd finally ditched the expectations. I stopped abiding by a years-old study plan and projecting my test-day performance using practice exams, instead dedicating myself wholly to studying. While taking the test, I thought not of the questions I had missed but of the practice I'd put in — and found confidence in that. And when I checked my score a few weeks later, I'd gotten what I'd been aiming for, and then some. All because I stopped caring about some arbitrary measurements and benchmarks and simply did what I needed to do.

Worse still is the case in which you fail to reach your goal, too stifled by the requirements of the goal to which you've subjected yourself to achieve anything of substance. When I followed goals while working on side projects, I was effectively splintering my resources — time, energy, focus, willpower, you name it — between worrying about meeting the goal's deadlines and actually getting stuff done, to the point where I didn't have enough leftover bandwidth to do either. It's no wonder I was unable to make progress toward my goal: Not only did coming up with the accompanying plan exhaust me (as with my SAT shenanigans), but so was sticking to the goal itself. If I'd cut the fluff of goal-setting and plan-following and fast-forwarded to the actual doing, I would have been able to learn and achieve so much — and likely more than the objective of any goal my imagination could've conjured at that.

Goals suck. Plans suck. The blueprint sucks. You deserve better. So, now what? Goals and plans are equal parts intention and expectation. Living intentionally, purposefully, is a must for finding success (however you define it). But doing so without expectation is just as important. When you come to expect something of yourself, you inherently enjoy doing that thing less and, as a result, restrict your ability to go far in the direction of that expectation.

It's tough leaving the blueprint behind — it feels safe, comfortable. Defining the terms and conditions of your life in such concrete terms makes it seem as if you're guaranteeing your success. Don't fall for the trap. When formulating a goal, you can only envision what you are capable of accomplishing at that given moment. As such, your goal is bound to the skills and abilities you have right now, and blind to the knowledge and experience you'll gain in the future. Thus, adhering to a goal prevents you from realizing anything beyond your past limitations. Rather, commit the same passion that led you to create a goal — or invest in a plan — to immersing yourself in something you currently have no idea how to do. In this way, you are

consistently expanding upon everything you thought you were capable of — all without the added stress of an outdated standard you once enforced upon yourself.

You have no idea what you are capable of. None of us do. Don't try to quantify it. If you want something badly enough, you will find a way to make it happen. You don't need goals; you need grit. And when you have that, you are infinite.