



# Book Hard Goals

## The Secret to Getting from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be

Mark Murphy  
McGraw-Hill, 2010

### Recommendation

Are the goals you are struggling to achieve just too difficult? Probably not. Most likely, they’re too easy. Most people set mediocre, unimportant goals and don’t even pay attention to them, take them seriously or remember them. Leadership consultant Mark Murphy suggests a much different approach: Make your goals as difficult as possible, and set objectives that are absolutely essential to your continued well-being. Such ambitious goals actively engage you and focus your mind. *BooksInShort* recommends Murphy’s well-researched, scientifically documented explanation of his strategy. He includes numerous real-life examples of how “HARD Goals” force people to focus their efforts. As James Boswell, the famous biographer, once said, “Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.” Murphy’s solution to the problem of focusing on your goals appears at the end of his four main chapters: “Get more examples and tools at [hardgoals.com](http://hardgoals.com).”

### Take-Aways

- Many people fail to achieve the goals they set for themselves.
- Often, their objectives are relatively easy goals that do not engage them or challenge them to work hard.
- Instead, set “HARD Goals” that are “heartfelt, animated, required and difficult.”
- Heartfelt goals engage the emotions.
- Animated goals are objectives you can visualize and remember.
- Required goals outline absolutely essential achievements.
- Difficult goals force people to work diligently to attain them.
- When you plan a goal, set a firm target date.
- Create sequential mileposts listing what you must do to attain your goal.
- The most important marker is what you will do today to reach your goal.

### Summary

#### Promises You Can Keep

People routinely make resolutions about changing their behavior and accomplishing major goals – quitting smoking, losing weight, getting a big raise – and then fail to fulfill them. However, some people do keep their promises to themselves and achieve their goals. They succeed because they set demanding goals that motivate, challenge and inspire them.

“Most of our goals aren’t worth the paper they’re printed on (or the pixels that display them).”

In one study, only 13% of respondents thought their goals were helping them become the best people they could be. Many people set mediocre goals that don’t require a wholehearted personal investment of time, energy and purpose. If you are lackadaisical about your goals, and if they aren’t essential or inspirational, they won’t inculcate real motivation. You’ll abandon them when the going gets tough. Instead, set “HARD goals” that are:

- “Heartfelt.”
- “Animated.”
- “Required.”
- “Difficult.”

## Heartfelt Connections

If your goal is not important to you, if it’s not something you deeply want, you probably won’t achieve it. On the other hand, if your goal means everything to you, you will move heaven and earth to accomplish it. As Apple introduces one technological marvel after another, each new step matters deeply to CEO Steve Jobs. For instance, he called the iPad “the most important work he’s ever done.” Like Jobs, people who care intently about their goals discuss them using such words as “pumped, excited, can’t wait, fired up.” However, people do not tend to work diligently to attain goals that others – their spouses, their managers or their friends – set for them. Motivation comes from emotional excitement and a “heartfelt connection,” which stems from three kinds of attachment:

1. **“Intrinsic connection”** – If your goal concerns something you truly care about, you automatically will feel an innate connection to it. Jobs routinely refers to Apple’s products in glowing terms: “This is an awesome computer.” “This is the coolest thing we’ve ever done with video.” “This is an incredible way to have fun.”
2. **“Personal connection”** – A sense of personal connection can help you attain any objective. If you struggle to lose weight and never succeed, try reframing that ambition in terms of setting a good example for someone you love, such as your child. When you think about your goal in these terms, your motivation naturally becomes more heartfelt.
3. **“Extrinsic connection”** – In some cases, an intrinsic or personal connection isn’t in play or isn’t sufficiently motivating. That’s when an extrinsic connection – for example, a financial reward – can be useful. Companies often use extrinsic motivators (like bonuses) to urge their employees to achieve their professional goals.

## Animated Images

To attain your goal, you must be able to visualize vividly how its successful completion will change your life. When Jobs was planning the iPad, he “saw a movie in his head” that showed happy Apple customers watching videos, reading and Web surfing on their iPads.

“The overwhelming majority of human beings have tremendous untapped potential. That’s why HARD Goals work so well; they are designed to help unleash the depth of great possibility that already exists inside of you.”

People are visual creatures. Only when you see something do you truly believe it; hence, “seeing is believing.” When you can envision something in your mind, you have a much better grasp of it. Certainly, a visual depiction is far more real than any written words. When people learn something by hearing it, three days later they can remember only about 10% of the information. Include a picture, however, and total recall climbs to 65%.

“You want an emotional attachment to your goals that gives you the ceaseless energy to pursue them no matter how tough it gets.”

You are a busy person with a busy mind. To make your objectives stand out from all the mental hoopla, the million different concerns and bits of data that jostle and clamor for your attention, vividly picture your goals in your mind. Thus, if your goal is to lose 30 pounds, picture yourself as a much slimmer person. See yourself in the beautiful clothes you cannot wear now because of your excess weight. Carry this animated, idealized vision of yourself around in your mind, and refer to it constantly during the day. This will give you a much better chance to realize your goal.

“If we can imagine something, see it or picture it, we’re a lot more likely to process, understand and embrace it.”

Animating your goals involves “picturing, visualizing, envisioning” and “imagining.” The more you can see in your mind’s eye how your life will change when you achieve your goal, the more likely you are to accomplish it. To “animate” your goals, use as many “pictures, drawings, visualization” and “mnemonics” as possible. Place your visual reminders where they will do you the most good, around your office and throughout your home.

“Humans are evolutionarily wired for visual, not textual, stimuli.”

Your visual image does not have to be dramatic. If you want to quit smoking, envision something as simple as sitting at the breakfast table enjoying a cup of coffee without a cigarette and a messy ashtray. Envision yourself as you want to be after you achieve your goal. Make this image as vivid as possible. Seeing really is believing. And while pictures are far better than words, in addition to vividly picturing your goals, you also will find it helpful to write them down.

## Required Achievement

Your goals must seem like almost life-and-death issues to you. Rumor has it that Jobs perfected and finalized the iPad while recovering from liver transplant surgery. Setting distant goals you don’t plan to deal with until much later is easy; you can declare you’ll do anything in the future at no cost to you now. When the time comes to begin working toward your goal, you can push back the date. While you can repeat this process over and over, it eventually becomes a question of procrastination, which will endanger your objectives and undermine your drive. In one research study, 94% of respondents said, “procrastination hurt their happiness.” Of course it does. For example, obese people who postpone losing weight can develop all sorts of medical problems.

“When you bring the future into the present with an incredibly vivid picture of your goal, your brain takes ownership of it; it wants it right here, right now.”

You must feel a sense of urgency about your goals or they will never happen. Unfortunately, current ambitions mean much more to people than future objectives. Thus, those who aren’t truly serious about their goals constantly push the future back. However, heavily discounting the future means that “you’re a lot less likely to be moved by the prospect of achieving great results” later.

“People spend way too much time trying to figure out how to trick themselves into implementing mediocre goals.”

This problem exhibits itself in another way. Say you are on a diet, but you are tempted to eat a piece of chocolate cake in a restaurant. Consider how your mind evaluates whether to eat the cake: “Option A: Enjoy cake now. Option B: Look skinny and feel emotionally great in three months (while feeling some loss or deprivation in the present).” Obviously, with this type of thinking, the benefit of eating the cake now far outweighs the benefit of being slimmer months down the road. To work around this problem, use your imagination to make the future appear much more desirable than the present.

“Steve Jobs has made a career out of doing things others said couldn’t be done...no goal he’s ever set is going to pass the Achievable and Realistic test for a SMART goal.”

Or, perhaps, you think about your diet this way: “I can’t eat three slices of pizza or a bucket of wings, gotta give up molten chocolate cake, no more dinners out at Rae’s, can’t eat fried green tomatoes with the horseradish cream sauce, I’ll get hunger pangs in the evening.” This type of thinking floods your mind with negative ideas about the costs of dieting. To beat this mental assault, mount a heroic effort to stay on your diet. That requires thinking about the future benefits of losing weight. Tell yourself, “I’ll wear those dark blue jeans that I haven’t worn in eight years, and I’ll pair them with that slim-fitting shirt I ordered online in a size too small and thus haven’t yet been able to wear.” It is all a matter of how you frame the problem.

## **Difficult Roads to Travel**

Tough goals keep you inspired, but most people do not push themselves enough. They are capable of far more than they imagine. The HARD Goals approach is an ideal way to help people realize their full potential. The fact is most people do not achieve even close to what they could accomplish if they had the right motivation. HARD Goals give people truly worthwhile objectives that are inspirational and motivating. When you create a HARD Goal for yourself, you give yourself the best opportunity to achieve your goal.

“Procrastination is the number one killer of HARD Goals.”

How can this be? The answer is simple: The HARD Goals process requires you to put everything you have into pursuing your stated ambitions. And, just as important, it demands that you pay particularly close attention to your objectives. According to biologist John Medina, “The more the brain pays attention to a given stimulus, the more elaborately information will be encoded – and retained.” There you have it. HARD Goals muster all your focus, making you more inclined to strive (mightily) to achieve them. And because you work so diligently, you have the best chance to succeed and accomplish your goals. You understand that your goals are important. This motivates you to attain them. The result is a win-win deal.

“‘I’ll start tomorrow.’ Three words that are the death knell for goals. Because how many times have you said ‘tomorrow’ when what you really meant was ‘never’?”

The best way to ensure that a goal truly qualifies as a HARD Goal is to set a parameter outside of your comfort zone – but not so far outside that it seems wildly impossible. Such ambitious goals probably will make you feel fearful at some point. Be prepared to deal with that emotion in a mature way. For example, you may think, “If I fail to achieve my goal, I’ll die from embarrassment.” When you objectively analyze this fear, you will quickly see that it is specious. And once you come to this understanding, you can keep such a fear from affecting your motivation.

## **“SMART Goals” Are Stupid**

Corporations make a big mistake when they use the “goal-setting process called SMART Goals,” that calls for “specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-limited” objectives. A specific, realistic, achievable goal is not daunting or difficult enough to be a genuine energizing challenge. President John F. Kennedy defined a truly inspirational target when he asked the United States to “commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the Earth.” People push themselves to achieve HARD Goals, but they ignore easy goals as not being worth the effort.

## **Pursuing Hard Goals**

OK, you have set a genuine HARD Goal for yourself, and you are ready to pursue it. What now? Plan an end date, for example, one year from your kickoff, when you will attain your goal.

“If your goal demands you start from scratch and learn a whole host of new skills, well, just create a HARD learning goal to get yourself up and running.”

Once you set a date, slice the time span in half (in this case, six months) and ask yourself: “What must I have accomplished at the six-month mark in order to know that I’m on track to achieve the full HARD Goal?”

Now, cut this marker in half (three months), and ask yourself the same question, but about the three-month milestone. Then identify a six-week milestone. Keep slicing the duration period in half, repeating the same sort of question, until you get down to one week and then to one day.

“Having difficult goals will increase your performance.”

Each day, ask yourself, “What must I have accomplished today in order to know that I’m on track” to achieve my HARD Goal? By handling things this way, you can get started right away on your quest to fulfill your objectives. Plus, this process gives you a clear track to follow, and it reminds you that achieving your HARD Goal requires focused attention and daily work.

“With the exception of some sports, no characteristic of the brain or body constrains an individual from reaching an expert level.”

Another useful tip: Enlist a friend you can call upon for moral support as you pursue your goal. The purpose of this call is not happy talk. Rather, this friend will help you

constantly focus on your goal. Your friend should be ready to ask you frequent questions related to each of the HARD goal realms: For example, to inquire about a heartfelt facet of someone’s goal, you might ask, “Why do you care about your goal?” For the animated part of the goal, ask, “Tell me how it looks or feels when you hit your goal.”

To focus on the required element, ask, “Why is this goal necessary right now?” To hone in on the difficult feature of a goal, ask, “What did you do today to advance your goal?” Through such questions, you will be able to focus yourself on the HARD Goals that you plan – not hope – to achieve.

## About the Author

**Mark Murphy** is founder and CEO of Leadership IQ, a leadership-training firm. He also wrote *Hundred Percenters*.

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