

Goal Setting—the Jumping-off Point

In the same way that a company or a corporation needs a well-thought-out business plan that contains viable growth strategies and metrics, you and your career need a plan. If you want to learn, grow, and succeed, you will need to define your goals and develop a reasonable strategy for accomplishing them.

The continual setting and achieving of goals is the foundation of a satisfying career—or, quite often, it's the continual setting and *modifying* of goals before they can be achieved. (And, while we're on the subject, goal setting is also the foundation of a satisfying *life*.) Of course, there are some people who have enjoyed glorious careers that seem to have dropped into their laps. We've all heard about Natalie Portman being discovered by a Revlon cosmetics agent in a pizzeria on Long Island and—just like that!—she became a star. Hugh Hefner's daughter, Christie, became the CEO of Playboy, Inc., and probably *not* because she worked her way up from the mailroom. And Steve Forbes, editor-in-chief of *Forbes* magazine and CEO of Forbes Publishing Company, inherited the job from his father, Malcom Forbes, who inherited it from *his* father, B. C. Forbes. Sometimes, being in the right place—or the right family—at the right time pays off.

For the rest of us, though, setting goals is absolutely crucial: In order to get somewhere, you must choose a direction. And then you must start moving toward it. (Many years ago, I wrote one of SkillPath's registered taglines: "Pick a Direction and Grow." That's how much I believe in goal setting—enough to put it on the cover of our company catalogs.)

But not just any old goal will do. Certain goals can sap your confidence, make you feel like a failure, and carry you off in the wrong direction. Still others can leave you spinning your wheels, getting nowhere. But some goals—the right goals—will spur you on to success. Like a beacon in the night, they'll continually lead you

down the right path, as long as you keep focusing on them.

Goals that work for you

So how do you set goals that help rather than hinder? There are five essential parts to a worthy goal. It should be:

- **Reasonable:** “One day you can be president of the United States if you really want to,” they told us when we were kids. And they insisted we should always “aim for the stars.” Sky-high career goals may be inspiring for some, but they can be self-defeating for the majority of people. (Let’s face it: Only one person at a time gets to be president, which leaves the rest of us out of a job!) That’s because impossible or nearly impossible goals practically ensure you’ll feel like a failure if or when you don’t achieve them. And when that happens, you may just want to pick up your ball and go home. To avoid the “impossible goal syndrome,” break down your long-term goals (e.g., getting into management) into something more realistic. Set smaller, bite-sized, daily goals, like showing up for work on time, spending at least 15 minutes networking with people who can help you, and getting all the way through a reasonable to-do list. These repeated successes will build your feelings of personal fulfillment *and* your confidence, while steadily moving you closer to your larger, long-term goals.
- **Specific:** Set clear-cut, simple goals. Instead of saying something vague like, “I want to move up the career ladder,” say, “I’ll get a degree in my field,” or “I’ll make sure that all my reports are on time and accurate.” Once you’ve pinpointed some goals (no more than five at a time), write them down and say them out loud. Committing them to paper will make them more concrete. By thinking about them, saying them out loud, *and* writing them down, your brain will

build multiple strong connections to your goals, making you more likely to be successful!

- **Measurable:** This goes hand in hand with being specific. Make sure your goals have clear outcomes that you can see or quantify in some way. Instead of saying, “I’m going to be a better employee,” say, “I will contribute at least one constructive idea to every staff meeting.” This will make it easier for you to track your results. Either you reached your goal or you didn’t.
- **Adjustable:** If your goal is too rigid or impractical, it might not be attainable. For example, let’s say you’ve set a goal of getting your master’s degree no later than one year from today. But if you are working full-time, have two small children, and have suddenly found out you must vacate your house and move across town, your timeline for getting that degree will probably need to be lengthened. Or you may decide that it isn’t really necessary, or maybe it’s not something you truly want to do. Goals require not only ability and drive, but commitment and opportunity. Reevaluate each goal periodically and decide if it’s still something you really want to pursue. Then give yourself the opportunity to change your mind or create more realistic or desirable goals. (Case in point: About 10 years ago, I changed my mind about wanting to learn to skydive. Jumping out of an airplane and hoping the parachute opens? What was I *thinking*? Sorry, avid skydivers—maybe I’m just a chicken!)
- **Given a time frame:** Setting a deadline is particularly important, especially if you tend to procrastinate. Without a deadline, it may be hard to find a reason to act right *now*; there’s no real sense of urgency. So pick an end date for achieving your goal (again, write it down), as in, “I’m going to make 10 cold calls before noon every day for one month.”