

Making Goals Effective: A Primer for Coaches

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The purpose of this paper is to present coaches with guidelines for setting up a goal-setting program. Research in sport and organizational psychology is briefly reviewed to provide a background of empirical support for the positive effects of goal setting on performance along with specifying different types of goals. Goal principles reviewed include making goals specific and measurable, written, realistic/challenging, short and long-term, and both individual and team-oriented. In addition, goals need to have specific implementation plans, be used extensively in practice, and be used in combinations. A case study which focuses on a goal-setting program is presented which highlights the process of goal implementation.

KEYWORDS *goal-setting, motivation, outcome goals, performance goals, process goals*

We want to win the conference championship.

I want to bat .300 this season

I want to improve my golf game so I can win the club championship

I want to lose 15 pounds in the next three months

I want to make the starting line-up by the beginning of the season

I want to average 10 rebounds per game

We want to hold the opposition to less than 100 rushing yards per game

These are all typical goals that coaches and athletes set. At first, these all seem reasonable (given that they are realistic) and you might see these posted on athletes' lockers, on whiteboards in coaches' offices or on someone's mirror at home. However, research in sport (Burton & Weiss, 2008) and organizational (Locke & Latham, 1990a, 1990b) settings has clearly shown just setting goals does not ensure any improvements in performance or productivity.

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Rather, when coaches set goals, they need to use certain principles and guidelines to maximize their effectiveness.

The purpose of this paper is to provide coaches with these principles so they might set the kind of goals that will be most effective. With the principles in hand, a case study goal-setting program will be presented so coaches and athletes can get a sense of how these principles would be employed as well as the common obstacles they might run into in setting up a goal-setting program. But first, before delving into these principles and case study, it is instructive to briefly discuss the different types of goals and how goals work.

OUTCOME, PERFORMANCE AND PROCESS GOALS

In sport, three types of goals are discussed: outcome, performance, and process goals. *Outcome goals* focus on the end result of a competition and are therefore primarily concerned with winning and losing. An athlete is not in total control of reaching his or her outcome goal, since winning or losing depends, at least in part, on the performance of the opponent. *Performance goals* refer to an individual athlete's performance independent of the other competitors or the team. For example, a performance goal might be to improve your free throw percentage from 68 percent to 75 percent. An athlete is in control of achieving a performance goal because the performance of other players or competitors does not affect the goal's attainment. *Process goals* are usually concerned with how an athlete performs a certain skill. These goals tend to be used during practice or training. For example, a process goal in baseball might involve getting down on one knee when fielding a sharp ground ball (percentages can be placed on these process goals to make them more specific). All three types of goals can be effective in enhancing performance and positively affecting behavior and thus it is recommended that performers prioritize their goals since different types of goals might be better for different situations (e.g., practice vs. competition).

SPORT PSYCHOLOGY LITERATURE ON GOAL SETTING

More than 650 goal-setting studies have been conducted in industrial and organizational settings, testing aspects of goal setting such as goal specificity (do your best vs. specific goals), goal proximity (short vs. long-term goals), goal commitment and goal type (outcome, performance and process goals). Research over the past 45 years clearly shows that in approximately 90% of the studies, specific, difficult goals lead to higher levels of task performance than easy goals, no goals or "do your best" goals. However, it is only in the

past 25 years that sport psychology researchers have systematically studied the area. In the most recent review of goal setting in sport, Burton and Weiss (2008) reviewed 88 studies of which 70 demonstrated moderate to strong goal-setting effects, which is an 80% effectiveness rate.

Some specific consistent findings from the sport/exercise area are listed below (Weinberg, 2002; Weinberg & Butt, 2005):

- Performance is enhanced when goals are moderately difficult, challenging and realistic.
- Goal setting provides athletes with direction and focus.
- Motivation will be higher if athletes are committed to their goals and accept them.
- Goals plus feedback produce better performance than either goals alone or feedback alone.
- Goal barriers are generally categorized as physical (e.g., injury), psychological (e.g., lack of confidence) or external (e.g., parental over-involvement).
- Goals should be prioritized.
- Performance and process goals should generally be emphasized because they come under the athlete's control.
- Time pressures, stress, tiredness, academic pressures and social relationships negatively affect goal achievement.
- Both short-term and long-term goals are important. Long-term goals provide direction and short-term goals provide motivation as well as making long-term goals seem more achievable, since sometimes the "whole" can be daunting.
- While action plans help to implement goal-setting strategies, many athletes do not use them.
- While many athletes and coaches think about and image their goals, they are not consistent in writing them down.

PRINCIPLES OF GOAL SETTING

When discussing the principles of effective goal setting, it is important to emphasize the distinction between the "science" and the "art" of setting goals. Researchers can provide practitioners with the science of goal setting, which leads to the development of certain principles. But situational constraints and individual differences always play a role; thus coaches need to know their teams and individual athletes to maximize goal-setting effectiveness. It is with these cautionary notes that principles for developing a goal-setting program are introduced.

Set Specific, Measurable Goals

One of the reasons that goals need to be specific is that they also need to be measurable so that performers know they are making progress towards

achieving them. To achieve maximum performance, a weightlifter, for example, might set a goal to improve on the weight lifted by 10 percent for each of the next six months. In addition, a process goal specifying how he might accomplish this gain would also be useful (e.g., employing a specific lifting technique). In this way, he would have something specific to shoot for and would receive feedback on exactly how much he had improved in attempting to reach this goal.

Use Short-Term and Long-Term Goals

Coaches typically set outcome-oriented and long-term goals, focusing on winning a division championship. Long-term goals are critical, as they provide individuals with a direction and destination, and can act as dream goals. However, research has revealed that both short- and long-term goals are needed to maintain motivation and performance (Weinberg, Butt, & Knight, 2001). Short-term goals help individuals focus on small improvements and also provide continuous feedback.

Make Goals Challenging But Realistic

Performers should set goals that are challenging yet realistically achievable; in essence, the goals should be moderately difficult, as opposed to moderate or difficult. If goals are too easy, individuals have a tendency to become complacent, not putting in consistent effort, since they feel that they can reach the goal without great effort. Conversely, if goals are too difficult, individuals will have a tendency to lose motivation and possibly give up when they fall short of their goal. But how does one determine if a goal is realistic and challenging? Here is where the art of coaching comes in; it is imperative that coaches know each individual athlete, in order to determine the appropriate challenge for that athlete. This requires knowledge of the capabilities of each athlete as well as the demands of the task, in optimally “pushing” athletes to reach their respective challenging goals.

Write Goals Down

While several sport psychology researchers have found it important to record goals, research has also revealed that coaches and athletes generally do not write down their goals, or at least do not do so in a systematic fashion (Weinberg et al., 2001). Goals should be displayed in a place where they can be easily seen, such as inside lockers or on a notice board in a prominent place. What is essential is that the goals remain first and foremost in athletes' minds and remain salient to them.

Use a Combination of Process, Performance and Outcome Goals

Research with NCAA athletes has revealed that the three most often stated goals were winning, improving performance and having fun (Weinberg, Burton, Yukelson, & Weigand, 1993). For some athletes, if they played well they would most likely win, and winning was fun. Thus, coaches should use all three working together to produce an optimal performance and result. The lesson in this is that outcome goals need to be balanced by performance and process goals. For example, if athletes are losing, but still are having fun and see themselves improving, they can continue to maintain a high level of motivation, despite the poor outcome.

Use Individual and Team Goals

Individual goals for team sport athletes are appropriate as long as they do not conflict with team goals. For example, if a baseball player sets a goal of hitting 25 home runs for the season, this personal ambition could conflict with team goals if the player becomes more concerned with hitting home runs than with helping the team win. One example of how team and individual goals should merge would be the situation where a basketball player's goal is to improve his foul shooting from 70–80% as this would not only improve his performance but help the team to score more points and hopefully eventually win the game.

Set Practice Goals

Given the large amounts of time athletes spend practicing, it is important that goals for both practice and competition be set by coaches (Weinberg et al., 2001). Setting practice goals is a good way to keep an athlete motivated and focused during practice sessions. Research with high school and college coaches (Weinberg et al., 2001, 2002) has confirmed that coaches feel it is important to set goals both in practice and in competition. The focus of practice goals should be on process goals such as following through when shooting in basketball or transferring weight when hitting a baseball.

Develop Plans to Reach Goals

Unfortunately, many coaches do not use plans and seem to believe that simply having goals will improve performance. However, strategies need to be specific and should involve definite numbers (e.g., how much, how many, how often). So one should always ask the question, "What do I need to do to reach my goals?"

GOAL SETTING: A CASE STUDY

Many coaches are familiar with a lot of these principles but still formal goal-setting programs are either not implemented at all or there is an attempt to do some goal setting but goals are not set in an effective manner. So, a case study of a baseball coach and his team is presented which employs many of the principles involved as well as including obstacles to setting up and implementing a goal-setting intervention.

Planning Phase

Bill Taylor was taking over a high school baseball program that had a string of losing seasons. He wanted to turn things around so that the players would have more positive attitudes as well as specific offensive, defensive and fitness goals to shoot for. So, one of the first things he did was to talk to his assistant coach (who was returning from last year) and his two co-captains. He had them assess both individual and team needs and he looked at statistics to help round out his needs assessment. The captains identified several specific areas such as running the bases more intelligently, being more patient at the plate, and improving fielding technique, especially on ground balls. But Coach Taylor was careful to include other needs besides performance improvements, such as enjoyment, satisfaction, team cohesion, and intrinsic motivation. Such needs then form the basis on which specific goals were going to be set (see Table 1 for an example of different needs and goals in different sports). Once the needs were determined,

TABLE 1 Areas in Which Goals Can Be Set

Goal Area	Goal
Individual skills	I will decrease my time by 0.5 seconds in the 800-meter run by increasing my speed in the initial 100 meters through a more explosive start.
Team skills	Our high school basketball team will increase their free-throw percentage from 64% to 72% by midseason.
Fitness	An executive will lower her resting heart rate from 81 beats per minute to 65 beats per minute by participating in a 40-minute aerobic dance class at least 3 days per week for the next 6 months.
Playing time	A junior in high school will earn a varsity football letter by participating in at least 16 different game quarters during the season.
Enjoyment	A veteran professional golfer player will get more pleasure from touring by identifying and visiting one new restaurant and historic site in each tour city.
Psychological skills	A gymnast will attempt to regain her confidence on her balance beam routine (during which she fell off the beam the last two times in competition) by visualizing a successful routine before each practice attempt and repeating at least one positive self-statement.

Coach Taylor planned specific strategies to help achieve the goals set for the coming season. For example, Coach Taylor felt that the team was not fit enough last year, and thus he was going to schedule fitness training an hour a day three days per week. In addition, he felt the team was too negative last year so he insisted on encouraging, positive statements among teammates.

The biggest reason that coaches don't always follow-through with their goal-setting programs is perceived lack of time. Coach Taylor knew this (as it happened to him before) and he was determined to overcome this obstacle. Therefore, he instructed his assistant coach and co-captains to meet weekly to discuss how the goal-setting program was going and report to him any changes that needed to be made to ensure that the players were setting their goals and working hard to reach their goals.

Meeting Phase

During the first official meeting at the beginning of the season before practice began, Coach Taylor provided the players with examples of effective and ineffective goals, along with basic information about different types of goals. The principles noted above were typed out and handed to all players so they could get a better understanding of the different types of goals and the most effective ways to set goals. These were then discussed by the coaching staff and players, and specific examples were provided so the players understood how to set goals effectively.

However, although the players were getting all this goal-setting information, Coach Taylor felt they needed time to digest this information and should not be expected to be able to list their specific goals immediately. Rather, players should think about setting goals in specific areas, as well as implementation strategies. This will provide them with an opportunity to think about different options instead of having to come up with goals and strategies on the spot. Thus, based on the input from the assistant coach and the co-captains, Coach Taylor asked players to be ready for next meeting by setting three personal goals (using the goal-setting principles), and three team goals in the areas of fielding percentage, on base percentage, and batting average. He knew that setting too many goals could be a problem so he had his players only focus on a few specific goals. Besides these performance goals, Coach Taylor wanted each player to have a strategy (process goal) for how to reach each performance goal. These would represent the short-term goals, which would help players reach their long-term goals. Specific feedback mechanisms were set up by Coach Taylor to provide athletes with systematic information regarding how they were doing in terms of reaching their goals.

After the initial meeting, Coach Taylor scheduled a second meeting where team goals would be discussed and decided upon by the coach and

team. To do this, each player's team goals were placed on the blackboard and then the three-team goal areas noted by Coach Taylor were discussed. After this discussion, a vote was taken on each team goal and Coach Taylor recoded the different strategies needed to reach each of these team goals. For example, a half-hour of practice three days a week would be targeted to fielding ground balls and getting your body down and in front of the ball.

In addition to the team meetings, Coach Taylor and his assistant coach met individually with all players to discuss, set, and record their specific goals. This was done in a way in which players felt that they "owned" their goals but the coaches were critical in helping players decide on realistic goals. Thus if a player batted .250 last year and wanted to set a goal to bat .350 this year, the coach might suggest that .300 would be a difficult goal and encourage the player to set this more realistic goal. But eventually it was up to the player to agree to the specific goal. All goals were then written down and displayed in a prominent place (e.g., taped on lockers or on the locker-room wall) so these goals would be seen by all teammates every day. This increases goal commitment, which is essential for achievement and continued striving to reach goals. Finally, the coaches worked with players to help provide them with very specific strategies to reach their goals.

Goal Evaluation Phase

Coach Taylor knew that while many coaches specifically planned sessions for goal reevaluation, most were haphazard in their approach. In essence, they didn't really follow through to evaluate the effectiveness of their goal-setting program. In addition, Coach Taylor knew it was important that goals be re-evaluated, as conditions can change throughout the year owing to a variety of circumstances. For example academic pressures in the form of tests and papers were a critical part of being a successful student and could interfere with reaching their baseball specific goals; so players met with coaches on a bi-weekly basis to discuss their academic schedules in relation to time spent on their baseball goals.

In addition Coach Taylor set up goal evaluation meetings once a month with each player. At this time, the player's progress toward his goals would be evaluated and then goals could be revised upwards or downwards. For example, if a baseball player had a goal of batting .300 but was batting only .225 at midseason due to an injury, then the goal might be revised downward to .275. The key point is that Coach Taylor and his staff were going to keep goals in the front of players' minds and continually assess and record their progress toward reaching the goals. In this way, each player was held responsible for his individual goals. In addition, Coach Taylor held meetings with the team once every two weeks to go over how they were doing toward reaching their team goals. The meeting times were potentially

altered when appropriate. At all points these goals were recorded and kept in places the individuals and/or team would see on a daily basis.

CONCLUSION

It has been demonstrated over and over again that goal setting is one of the most effective techniques for enhancing motivation and performance. Most coaches and athletes set goals, but unfortunately, these goals are not usually set in a manner that would make them maximally effective. Along these lines, the different types of goals and basic principles of goal setting were presented so coaches and athletes would keep these in mind when setting up a goal-setting program. To demonstrate the actual implementation of these goals and principles, a case study was presented with the intent of providing practitioners with a model or at least a template to follow. This included some of the potential obstacles that typically have to be overcome in setting up goal-setting programs. It is not easy implementing a goal-setting program, but if it is done correctly and consistently, the rewards in terms of enhanced performance and other behavioral and psychological measures will be well worth it.

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