

Why Successful People Don't Set Goals and You Shouldn't Either

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Coach

Athlete's Table

Now, there is by far the most common time when people and organizations sit down and set goals on what they want to achieve. Indeed there are **many excellent articles** on why goal setting can be important, how to set goals, how to make sure you achieve them. **But what if there was another perspective on setting goals? What if setting goals could actually be a negative thing?** I am conscious that this is a very contentious view as 99.9% of people including highly respected business mentors and coaches strongly support the concept of setting goals (even if they, themselves may not set them) but read on.

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Setting of goals is considered **basic common sense** in the business world and it's reinforced by research. **Like that study done on the Yale Business School class of 1953 you may have heard of, in which only 3% of the graduating students wrote down clear goals.** Twenty years later, those 3% had a

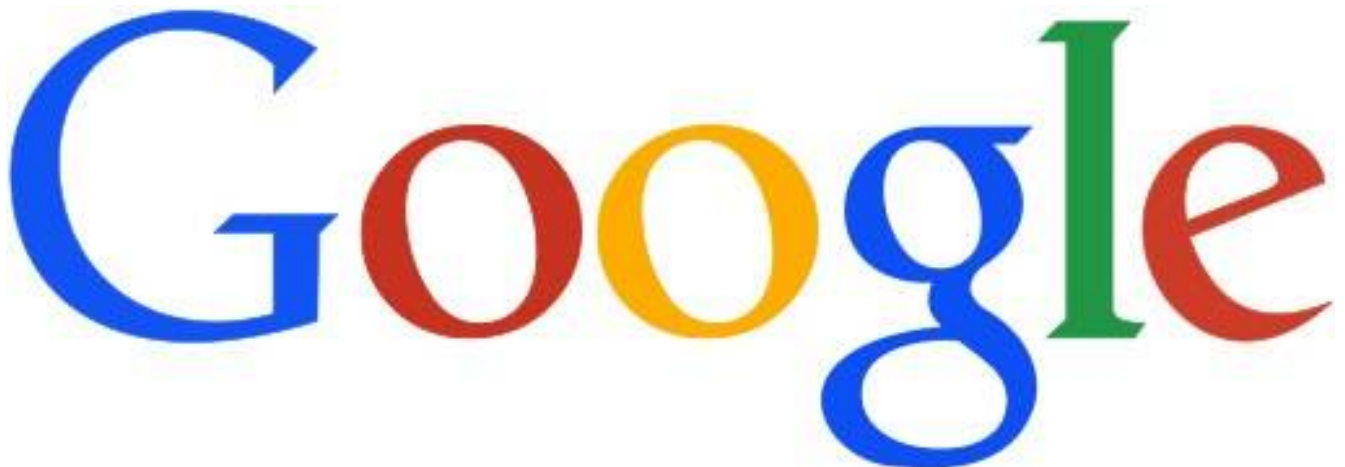
greater combined net worth than the other 97%. Compelling, right? There are literally over a thousand articles that cite this study, and people like Anthony Robbins quote it as the basis for their books and seminars.

It would be compelling if it were true. But it isn't. **That study doesn't exist. It's pure urban myth.** In fact, even [Yale's own library site](#) advises it is a myth.

So what does it matter if this study wasn't actually true? Everyone knows that successful people all set goals. **Or do they?**

In the mid 1990s, an article was published in an Australian magazine around what makes successful people successful. It looked at high-flying business executives, champion sportspeople, and media personalities to try and find what common traits they possessed. One of the common traits regarded the setting of goals.

They didn't.



This is a trend that continues with modern organizations such as Google, who also do not set annual goals beyond those required by the SEC. In Google's case, they don't set corporate goals as it decreases their agility - the ability to respond to what the market is doing (which is often outside their control anyway). **There are many famous quotations from individuals or, often now defunct, companies who "knew" exactly what the industry was going to do.**

- "Man will not fly for fifty years." - Wilbur Wright, 1901
- "This band's going nowhere." - Pete Best, Original Beatles Drummer, 1962
- "There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their house." - Ken Olsen, Head of Digital Equipment Corp., 1977

How is it possible to set realistic goals when it is impossible to predict all those factors outside of our control that could influence these?

There have been lots of studies on what makes successful people successful, such as those referenced in Stephen Covey's book *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*. These people demonstrated traits like single mindedness, focus, and total commitment to a goal. The issue with this research, as documented in Jerker Denrell's 2003 study *Vicarious Learning, Undersampling of Failure and the Myths of Management* is that the study group is quite selective. **In this case, only successful people were studied.**



Not surprisingly you don't see many books on what makes abject failures unsuccessful, but in some studies, mostly anecdotal, it has been found that these people actually execute the *same* habits. **Single mindedness and total commitment to a goal can make the person oblivious to reality, unable to deal with changes to their market or environment.** Indeed in the 2013 "documentary" *Jobs*, the reason that made Steve Jobs successful - a single-minded focus on quality - was also the reason he was ultimately ousted from Apple, in that this focus made him oblivious to the other factors required for his company to succeed.

So if the value of setting goals is questionable or debatable, is there really a problem or potential harm with setting goals and what is it? Indeed the successful people interviewed in the magazine were asked why it was they didn't set goals. The answer was simple and very relevant for athletic performance.

"Defining goals defines your limitations."

As an example, picture a four-hour marathon runner whose goal it is to run a sub-3:30 marathon. He

works out what needs to be done - train to that specific pace and come race day run a 3:29. Goal met. This is a great example of where the goal setting worked. Didn't it?

Now imagine a four-hour marathon runner who commits each week to follow a balanced program of muscular endurance, weights, and track work. Each week he meets this commitment - a commitment to continuously improve. Come race day he runs 3:19. **In this case, setting a goal of 3:30 would have meant he didn't get the best out of himself - he sold himself short.**

Imagine again if for our four-hour runner a 3:30 marathon was never realistic anyway based on time until the event and available training time? Had he focused on improvement over the goal, he may have run 3:39, which is still a huge personal best. **Instead he "missed" his goal and is disappointed or, worse still, is injured from trying to push for an unrealistic goal and can't run the marathon at all.** This is also common in business where specific goals lead to people cheating or producing poor quality output so as purely to tick the box of meeting the goal.



The same is common for people trying to lose weight. They set a goal, instead of **focusing each day** on eating smart and exercising properly. For weight loss the issue can also be that a long-term goal is harder to be motivated for and thus slip-ups in nutrition become okay and self-justifiable as the people in question have months left to go. Weight loss is typically not linear, especially with obese people who

have lost their **insulin sensitivity**. This creates a conundrum where a long-term goal isn't motivating, but a short-term goal isn't an accurate reflection of progress.

So rather than defining your own limitations through long-term goals, perhaps just make a commitment to continual improvement. Successful people may not all set long-term goals, but they do commit to growing as an individual. They look at **what they can do each day** to make a small improvement that, over time, adds up. In fact a 1% improvement, over 68 days means you will be 100% better than you were yesterday.

In Japanese this term, continuous improvement, is called **kaizen**. The tattoo of which I have on my ankle.

References:

1. "Yale Business Research FAQ," Yale Libraries.
2. Steven Covey, *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People* (Simon & Schuster, 2013).
3. Jerker Denrell, "Vicarious Learning, Undersampling of Failure and the Myths of Management," *Organization Science* 14 (2003):227-243.

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Topic: Sports Psychology

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Graeme Turner gave up a lucrative IT career to pursue his passion in helping people achieve their fitness and lifestyle goals. Apart from being a nationally accredited triathlon coach, he is also a qualified sports nutritionist, strength and conditioning coach, and masseuse. He is a Retul Certified Bike Fitter, and he is even WKA certified to coach kickboxers and MMA fighters. Graeme's training and coaching philosophy is based on a minimalist program with an emphasis on power... [Read More](#)

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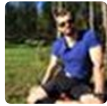
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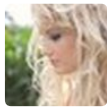
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Peter Johnsen · 4 months ago

Great article! Focus on processes, instead of a "set" goal. Like mastering a technique/skill, etc.

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Marina Yamamoto · 6 months ago

great article! I'm always being taught to set goals, but I like how you interperate it differently here. Choosing to stay committed to improvement and staying focused is a great goal as well, however! But one that doesn't set a limitation. Nice.

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Zoe Walker-Conway · 5 months ago

68 days @ 1% per day = 100% really?

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Becca Borawski Jenkins → Zoe Walker-Conway · 5 months ago

Hi Zoe - Yes, exactly! Because you are improving each day, the 1% represents more and more each day. The improvement compounds. It's not a linear thing. So it is indeed correct.

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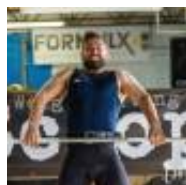
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