Module 3: Goal Setting

Why do we make goals?

Goals offer a sense of direction and purpose when it comes to our lives. Specific goals, such as those relating to academics and/or career plans, help direct our time during school and afterward. They help us narrow our attention and direct our efforts toward relevant activities. Goals also help us work through challenges and overcome obstacles and can lead to the development of and/or changes in behavior. Goal setting motivates us and helps assess our progress as well as define our roles in some situations, such as the work environment.

GET SMART

Your goals should be SMART—specific, measureable, achievable, relevant, and timely.

For a goal to be SPECIFIC, it must explain exactly what is expected, why it is important, who is involved, where it is going to happen, and which attributes are most important. You will need to ask yourself, “What do I want to accomplish?” and then name a goal that is clear. List specific reasons, purposes, and benefits for accomplishing this goal and identify participants other than yourself, location, requirements, and constraints. An ambiguous goal would be “I want to get fit.” What do you mean by “fit?” How do you plan to get fit? Where will you get fit? A more specific goal would be “I want to get fit by losing 15 pounds and two inches off my waist by next semester. I plan to work out with my sister Gina at World Gym four times a week; we will do weight lifting as well as some cardio exercises and yoga.”

For a goal to be MEASURABLE, it must come with concrete criteria for measuring progress. You will need to be able to answer such questions as “How much?” “How many?” and/or “How will I know when it is accomplished?” The logic behind this point is that you cannot know if you are making progress if the goal is not measurable. Returning to the fitness example, the first statement offers no criteria for measuring it; in fact, “fit” is not even defined! However, in the second statement, we know that the amount of pounds and inches lost can be tracked as well as the time spent working out and the different exercises completed. By measuring our progress, we know what is working and what is not.

For a goal to be ACHIEVABLE or ATTAINABLE, it must be a realistic one. You will need to ask if you can reach this goal and how you will accomplish it. For example, if you set the goal of becoming a professional dancer by the time you are 30 and you are 29 and a half and you have never taken a dance class in your life, then your dream may be out of reach. You want your goals to challenge you, but the goal must remain in reach and within standard performance. If your goal is to learn to dance, then you can accomplish that goal by taking classes and practicing, watching videos of professionals, and discussing the topic with those who already know how to dance.

For a goal to be RELEVANT, it must matter and be of importance. You will need to affirm that your efforts are worthwhile, that this is the right time to seek your goal, that it matches other efforts and
needs, and that you are the right person to accomplish it. For example, imagine you are applying to medical school, and you have set mini-goals to achieve this one, including taking the appropriate classes and volunteering at a local clinic. Your dream school requires one additional anatomy course that you have not taken. You have one opening left in your schedule during your last semester, but you really want to take a photography class instead. Which class is more relevant to accomplishing your goal? Which one will help you meet your smaller goal of taking the appropriate classes? The obvious answer is the anatomy class. If you still wanted to take the photography course, too, you may choose to audit it or take it after you graduate.

For a goal to be TIMELY, it must have some kind of deadline for completion to establish a sense of urgency. You will need to answer when you will work towards your goal, when the goal will be completed, and what you can do now. Implementing some kind of timeline helps prevent goals from being overtaken by day-to-day issues as well.

**AND THEN GET SMARTER**

In addition to making goals SMART, you may want to Evaluate and Reevaluate them over time as you change and grow. Your goals may become more specific, have different criteria, go in a new direction, be on a different timetable, or change completely. You may find a goal is no longer important enough to keep pursuing. That is why it is important to evaluate your work towards a goal continuously, including after you have met it. Going back to the medical school example, imagine you have been accepted to and enrolled in your dream school. Now what? Frequent evaluation forces you to stay motivated, keep direction, and create new goals, including smaller goals to reach bigger goals, when others have been accomplished.

It may be helpful for you to keep a journal to track your goals. A journal is where you can keep records of your progress including affirmations, successes, obstacles, and rewards. It can be the place where you write your goals as well as where you break them down into mini-goals, or steps, to accomplish the end goal. Moreover, you may want to share your goals publicly with a friend who can hold you accountable. The best scenario would be for you and your friend to hold one another accountable as you both work on your goals. Look for someone who is supportive and empathetic. This can create some pressure on you to continue working on your goal. Looking back at the fitness goal, imagine you were the speaker who planned to work out with your sister Gina. Now imagine waking up at five a.m. to go to the gym. Hard to get out of bed, isn’t it? But picture your sister (or your friend) waiting at the gym for you. It may be a little easier to get out of bed now.

Try to be honest but positive when assessing your progress. Remember that goals are messy business. Your SMART plan may fall apart, and your self-esteem—the self-confidence and pride—you may be tested and retested. Don’t beat yourself up, but don’t expect to make massive changes overnight. It may be difficult not to fall back into your old familiar ways of doing things because, often, you have spent years developing certain habits. But if you continuously assess your progress and rejoice in your victories as opposed to bemoaning mistakes, you will stay on course and meet your goals.

**REFERENCES CITED**


**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

Answer the following questions. **It is not necessary to retype the questions, just label them: "1.1" for Module 1, Question 1, "1.2" for Module 1, Question 2, and so on.**

**Reflection Question 1.** In your own words, why is goal setting important? How will it help you help your mentees? Try to reflect on what you have read and on your own experiences. Avoid regurgitating what you read above.

**Reflection Question 2.** Do you feel the SMARTER characteristics adequately address how goals should be structured? Why or why not? Can you think of any characteristics of goal-setting in addition to those above?

**Reflection Question 3.** Describe a goal you have for yourself by using the SMART acronym. You may already address each of the characteristics, or you may need to revise it to be more specific, measurable, etc.

**Email your answers to Ashley Byrd at pass@nwacc.edu**