

Motivational Intelligence: Three Steps to Setting Effective Goals

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Avital Schweitzer, 17, is clearly goal-oriented — she works hard to achieve the various tasks in her life. Knowledge@Wharton High School caught up with the rising high school senior from Pennsylvania this summer while she was attending a program at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for high school students who are interested in research.

We thought that Avital would be a great person to kick off our exploration of the practice of goal setting (you'll see why in a minute). While Avital says that she rarely explicitly states and discusses her goals, goal setting has always played a role in her life. During her junior year, for instance, she set personal goals to win a lacrosse championship, become debate-team captain and stay committed to a vegetarian diet. "In an academic environment when I set goals for myself, I often make lists that I need to complete in order to achieve them," notes Avital, who goes to Friends' Central School in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania. "This can include doing problem sets, meeting with a teacher or asking specific questions. I find this process to be relatively natural and easy because I think about it as the path that I must follow in order to achieve something. When I hit stumbling blocks, I reach out to resources for help or advice, like the Internet, my teachers or my parents. I think that learning about the best types of goals to set and standard methods to go about achieving these goals could be very beneficial in my day-to-day life."

Who better to turn to for this kind of insight into the art and science of goal setting than your own father? Avital's dad, Maurice Schweitzer, a Wharton professor of operations and information management, has researched the topic extensively for his classes on negotiating and related subjects. "Goals are powerfully motivating and will help us get where we want to be," says Schweitzer, co-author of the book *Friend & Foe: When to Cooperate, When to Compete, and How to Succeed at Both* (due to be published Sept. 29, 2015). "

["Across every domain, people who set specific, challenging goals outperform people who go out and just aim to do their best."?](#)

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Prof. Schweitzer breaks the process of setting goals into three key steps. They are as follows:

Step 1: Identify the right goal with an eye to the bigger picture.

[“The key to successfully identifying your goals is to figure out the attributes that present a complete picture of what you’re trying to achieve”?](#)

. Is your goal a full representation of what you want to accomplish? For example, setting a goal of buying a car for under \$5,000 might be too narrow. What else matters to you in the bigger picture? Do you want a car that will last for 10 or more years? Do you want a sunroof for trips to the beach? Is fuel efficiency an important factor in the car that you drive? Do you need more trunk space for your sports equipment? As you begin to identify your goals, “don’t stay so narrowly focused that you lose track of other things that are also important,” suggests Schweitzer. “You need to think broadly so that you don’t miss key attributes.” At the same time, he adds, think of identifying a series of smaller goals rather than one giant goal. If you want to be a millionaire by age 40, then where will you be at 20? 25? 30?

Step 2: Shape a goal that is challenging, yet realistic.

Here, the process of figuring out your best goals continues. Do you want your goal to be something that requires hard work to accomplish? Most of us would say yes. But that goal must also be motivating, not discouraging. For example, “if your goal involves saving money or buying a car, it’s got to be something that you can wake up in the morning and believe is realistic and attainable,” says Schweitzer. “It would be great to get a car for free and it would be ideal to save 98% of your income for the future, but neither is realistic. You don’t want to believe that your goal is impossible.

[“If you say that your goal doesn’t make any sense, you are more likely to abandon it.”?](#)

You should ask yourself, ‘Does this goal involve any drastic measures that I’m not prepared to commit to for the long-term?’”

Step 3: Commit to your goal.

Now that you know what you want to achieve, you must make it your own. Commit to it by writing it down, along with the steps you must take to get there; visualize to imagine yourself doing what is required to achieve your goal; tell other people that you are committed to this goal, and set up a system that binds you to the objective. “

[“What sort of commitment devices can you put into place that push you toward doing it, but also make it easier to do?”](#)”

asks Schweitzer. “If your goal is to exercise every day, block out time on your calendar to do that. If your goal is to save \$100 a month, you might have an automatic deduction from your account that saves the money every month. Also, telling other people will help you steel your resolve when, in the heat of the moment, you might want to cave in. You told your roommate and your friends that you wanted to achieve this goal. If you tell them that you changed course, you will be so embarrassed. This will give you more motivation in the moment.”

While goal setting can be incredibly empowering and motivating, Schweitzer also advises to proceed with caution – and integrity. “

[“Goals can motivate people to work harder and longer than they otherwise would, but sometimes those goals also motivate people to do things that aren’t quite right or appropriate”?](#)

,” he says. “You don’t want the pressure to succeed at your goal to be so intense that it becomes more important than anything else.” This might lead you down the path of cheating to, say, earn all A’s, or deflating footballs to win games. If the pressure gets too intense, it’s probably time to reassess, revise your goal and strike some much-needed balance. The journey to achieving goals should include exploration.

Conversation Starters

Maurice Schweitzer says, “Across every domain, people who set specific, challenging goals outperform people who go out and just aim to do their best.” What does he mean by this? What is the difference between trying your hardest to do

Avital Schweitzer set goals in high school to win a lacrosse championship, become debate-team captain and stay committed to a vegetarian diet. What are some of your general goals? Once you have a short list, begin to refine them by applying some of Maurice Schweitzer's goal-setting steps. What do you observe in this process? Is it more challenging than you thought? Are your goals challenging enough? Realistic?

How do ethics relate to goal setting and achieving? What are some high-profile examples of people compromising integrity to achieve their goals?

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