

**HOW TO SET REALISTIC GOALS:
A KEY TO ACHIEVEMENT
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Behavioral psychologists believe goals are important because they provide focus and direction. Goals allow people to plan ahead, accomplish tasks, and move forward. Goals can be altered, updated, or changed completely. Rather than feeling like victims, goal-oriented people feel a sense of achievement when having a vision, setting a goal, moving forward, and achieving their vision. The Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) gave good advice when he observed, “Go as far as you can see. When you get there, you will be able to see farther.” In this sense, a goal is like a vision of the future. Without goals, people drift through life without any sense of direction or purpose.

We can learn a simple tip from the way children achieve goals: They believe. Achieving goals requires action plus time. Most people overestimate what they can achieve in a short period of time, yet they underestimate what they can achieve over a long period of time. Small steps over a long period of time are more important than a giant leap attempted over a short period of time. Consistency outperforms intensity.

The title of this article is actually a misnomer. A more realistic title would be “How to Achieve Objectives.” The reason is because anyone can set goals, but not anyone can achieve them. As we see each New Year’s Eve, goals are more easily set than met. One of the main reasons that people fail to achieve their goals is because they fail to define their *objectives*, which are the concrete, specific steps that one takes to achieve a goal. Whereas goals are often more future-oriented, objectives are more present-oriented. Objectives consist of the specific things that a person does each day to make progress toward the goal.

An objective is a specific step that is taken toward a goal. In some ways, goals are *strategic* (i.e., the destination or end point that is to be achieved), whereas objectives are *tactical* (i.e., how to carry out the strategy to achieve the final destination). Each day, it is more important to focus on objectives—which will lead to goal attainment.

An objective must be stated so clearly that almost anyone would know when it is seen. If we can see it, then it is usually an objective. If we cannot see it, then it is probably a goal. One way of determining whether we have a goal or objective is to use the “see Johnny test” (Goldman, 1989): If we can see Johnny do it, then it’s an objective; if we can’t, then it’s a goal.

Set SMART objectives: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant/Realistic, and Timed (i.e., with a target date or deadline).

Specific: Objectives have a high level of specificity, with actual metrics and target dates that must be charted or tracked.

Measurable: Objectives must be specific enough to be measured. Identify the individuals responsible for tracking each objective. “Try” is a verb cannot be measured.

Attainable: Objectives must be possible to attain. Small steps over time are better than one giant step attempted immediately.

Relevant: Objectives must be directly related to the long-term goal. Relevance improves motivation.

Time-bound: Objectives have specific deadlines or target dates. “Someday” is not specific, but “this Friday at 09:00 AM” is specific.

Having a vision. These guidelines provide some tips for having a vision and setting goals.

- ✓Decide what *you* want.
- ✓Find out what it takes to succeed.
- ✓Set action goals that are *your* goals.
- ✓Set goals that are specific and realistic.
- ✓Make goals clear, concise, and concrete.
- ✓Make goals measurable and give them a time frame.
- ✓Write down your goals and review them every week.
- ✓Translate your goals into specific steps (objectives).
- ✓Organize yourself around your objective (action steps) each day.
- ✓Visualize and believe in yourself accomplishing goals.
- ✓Surround yourself with people who believe in your goals.
- ✓Focus on concrete, specific actions rather than on results.
- ✓Break your big goals down into smaller goals (objectives).
- ✓Break long-term goals down into shorter-term goals (objectives).
- ✓Set daily and weekly objectives (steps toward your short-term goals).
- ✓Set up an evaluation system to get regular feedback on your progress.
- ✓Focus on a positive approach (e.g., increase, improve) rather than a negative one.

Setting goals. These guidelines provide some useful tips for setting goals.

Specificity: Identify goals explicitly and clearly, because specificity increases the ability to evaluate progress (e.g., frequency, intensity, duration, context, and time).

Positivity: Express goals positively rather than negatively, because positivity increases more options for creating adaptive behavioral change.

Desirability: State goals as increasing desired behaviors rather than decreasing unwanted behaviors, because desirability builds motivation for change.

Defining objectives. These guidelines provide some useful tips for defining objectives.

Attainable: Express objectives as attainable rather than unreasonable, because attainability increases opportunities for success rather than failure in task completion. Use small tasks rather than big ones.

Operational: Define objectives as operational rather than as abstract, because clarity of the operations required increases the ability to define progress.

Measurable: State objectives as measurable rather than as vague, because measurability allows a charting of progress over time. Think of frequency, intensity, duration, and context of task performance.

Functional Analysis of Behavior. When thinking of a functional an operational definition of an action or behavior, it is useful to think in terms of these variables:

- ✓ **Specificity** refers to the specific behavior that can be observed, measured, or recorded in some way.
- ✓ **Frequency** refers to the number of times the behavior occurs in a specific period of time (i.e., how often it occurs).
- ✓ **Intensity** refers to the strength of the behavior in a specific period of time. (i.e., how much it occurs).
- ✓ **Duration** refers to the length of time the behavior occurs during a specific period of time (i.e., how long it occurs).
- ✓ **Context** refers to the location, situation, or place where the behavior occurs (i.e., where it occurs)—and where the behavior does not occur (i.e., exceptions).
- ✓ **Time** refers to time or day or night when the behavior occurs (i.e., when it occurs).

Reference

Goldman, A. R. (1989). *Accreditation and certification for providers of psychiatric, alcoholism, and drug abuse services*. Bala Cynwyd, PA: Practical Communications.

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