What Is More Important than Having Goals?

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How many times have you been told that goals are important to your success? Probably hundreds if not thousands of times. You've heard it from bosses, trainers, spouses, and parents. You've heard it from management gurus, motivational speakers, consultants, and coaches. You've likely been advised to make your goals SMART – specific, measurable, agreeable, realistic, and time-specific.

With so much attention to goals, you probably have myriad metrics, measurements, leading indicators of performance, lagging indicators of performance, key performance indicators, and management bonus objectives with which to keep up. If someone asked you to list your goals, you could probably provide scorecards, historical reports, near-term forecasts, and long-term forecasts. You could list your sales objectives, client satisfaction metrics, production goals, quality measurements, inventory turns, days sales outstanding, or whatever goals you are currently striving to achieve. For your personal life, you could probably add family goals, health goals, financial goals, and self-development goals. Yet is all this focus on goals really good for people? Are goals what truly drive peak performance at work? Or in life? Do goals sustain motivation? Are they fulfilling?

Of course goals are important. They provide a yardstick to measure and track progress. They provide direction. Yet on their own, they fall short. They are insufficient for building and maintaining motivation. They are fleeting as they move from the to-do list to the done list. Once completed, the hope for their attainment fades into the past.

What is missing if goals are great for giving direction and tracking progress but not enough to sustain motivation? What do people need to stimulate higher levels of engagement? What drives people to not only reach their current goals, but their next goals, and the ones after? What inspires people to give their discretionary effort?

The answer for most people is having a purpose. People want to pursue goals that support a higher level vision and mission. They want their work to have meaning. They want the satisfaction that comes from achieving something bigger than sales and corporate profits. They want to confront a meaningful challenge. They want to help others or improve something. They want to make a tangible difference.

Goals are not enough because they leave out the "why." They define "what" to do, not "why" to do it. Because goals are usually specific, they are narrow in scope. They might be milestones along an important journey – but to what destination? They typically only represent the achievement of a day, week, month, quarter, or year of effort. They denote the completion of a job, responsibility, or project, not a broader purpose. They lack a higher-level reason. They don't directly translate into a meaningful benefit, at least not for everyone. The achievement of a profit goal, for example, is significant to stockholders and employees participating in profit-sharing plans, but not for the rest of the employees.

People need a "why" to engage and drive them. They need a higher level ambition that provides meaning, not just direction. Pursuing goals such as a client satisfaction index, making money, attaining a level of fitness, and receiving a promotion are only satisfying when they support a longer-term purpose.

You may be thinking "there is good news" - your company has mission and vision statements that satisfy this need, right? Unfortunately, the answer is often "no". Most visions and missions are more focused on what organizations do than why they exist. Even for those missions that adequately articulate the "why", they are rarely motivating. They are more about impressing investors and customers. They don't represent actual execution as they are often compromised for short-term gains. Instead of a regularly reinforced purpose, missions become a dust-covered placard on a lobby wall. They are generic and often long-winded platitudes to which people give little attention.

In contrast to posting a generic platitude that people ignore, consider these principles when creating an organizational purpose, revising a vision, or bringing a mission to life:

- Describe the "why" that defines why you exist – i.e. the problem you are solving or the opportunity you are leveraging.
- Illustrate the outcome of what you do, the better future you strive to create.
- Highlight the impact of solving the problem or engaging the opportunity.
- Distinguish the targeted beneficiaries who receive your benefits.
- Differentiate what you do from others who claim to do the same work.
- Reinforce the purpose with examples, stories, and recognition.

Harley Davidson's purpose isn't to sell motorcycles but rather to "fulfill dreams of personal freedom." United Parcel Service's reason for being isn't to deliver packages but rather to "enable global commerce." Apple's mission under Steve Jobs wasn't to produce computers but rather "to make a contribution to the world by making tools for the mind that advance humankind."

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