

# Goal setting

- the importance of understanding the facts about my current reality
- the importance of defining my goal clearly
- that I do not need to know the details of how to achieve my goals before I start on the journey.

**Gestalt Psychology:** A theory of mind and brain ‘the whole is greater than the sum of the parts’ - our minds operate best when things are structured and organised as wholes

According to Gestalt psychologists, we are always working for order in our minds. We need to find associations and links to things that we already know – we need to fit things into logical patterns and shapes. A natural and common human instinct is to try to make sense of random chances – stand in any betting shop and watch the punters rationalise their decisions or try to select lottery numbers without providing some rational (irrational?) reasoning for the number selection.

**Discrepancy production:** the process of intentionally throwing your system out of order

Once we have solved a problem our energy and our creativity shuts down – not because we are lazy but because we do not need it once the problem is solved and the goal is met.

If we want to keep our drive and creativity up then we need to create what is called deliberate ‘discrepancy production’. In other words, create disorder or disharmony by setting new stretching goals. New goals create a discrepancy again and cause disorder, so that then the human mind gets to work looking to restore order, our RAS opens and then we find the energy to go on and achieve the goal.

**Discrepancy reduction:** the desire to return to order which stimulates drive and creativity

An important element of discrepancy production is what is known as current reality. Current reality is our perception of the way things are. One of our problems as individuals, teams and even whole organisations is that we concentrate too much on our current reality. We get bogged down in it.

**Current reality:** the facts as one perceives them to be at present

Current reality is always changing and is temporary, but we need to make the most accurate assessment of it as we can, because it is where we start from when we set goals.

**Vision:** a mental picture of the future as one wants it to be

The other element we need is vision, very simply a goal. A vision (or goal) is simply our ability to create the future the way we want it to be in our own minds and if necessary, in the minds of other people. It is a blueprint for our future.

How do we create a vision? We simply ask ourselves the question: “What do we really want?” What do we want for ourselves, for our organisation, for our colleagues? Just as we need to define our current reality as accurately as we can, we need to define our vision accurately and clearly. The

clearer our current reality and vision, the clearer the gap between them. The clearer the gap between them then the more energy and brainpower we are able to release.

However, we may now run into another difficulty unless we are very careful. We could trap ourselves by asking, “How are we going to do it?” If it is a big goal or vision, we may not be able to answer. Or friends and colleagues to whom we have revealed our goal may ask “How are you going to achieve that?” Then we may feel foolish because we do not know ‘how’.

Remember: if it is a big goal, we may not know how. We might need to invent the how. We might need others to help invent the how. It is a sure sign that if we know how to achieve our goal then the goal is too small – not stretching enough. There is rarely a direct line between current reality and vision if the vision or goal is a big one.

We don’t need the detail of how to achieve the goal but a process which will transfer the goal to our creative subconscious, which will trigger our brainpower and motivation to invent the how, which will take us from current reality to our goal.

The goal must be seen and felt as if already completed; as if it was already a fact to bring about strong motivation. This is how advertising works; the really clever advertising happens when you find yourself dreaming of owning their product and using it. When we see a TV advert about a fantastic new car, we may start seeing ourselves in that new car, thinking about how it feels to drive and how people react when they see us driving it. When we do this repeatedly and vividly, in a short space of time we will become dissatisfied with the car we have and find that we invent ways and means of going out and buying it.

This visualisation works both ways, of course. If our picture of current reality is brighter and clearer than our picture of the goal, we will stick with current reality. Vision can therefore anchor us in our present reality or take us to the new vision. As humans, we are picture-oriented, we always move towards the brighter picture whether it is current reality or a different future. Our challenge is to make sure that the vision of our goal is brighter and more attractive than current reality.

Take some time to think about how you think about your current situation and your future, what do you visualise, what do you spend most time focussing on? Is it about making the vision of what you really want big, bright and compelling? Or does it deepen and strengthen the picture of an unwanted current reality?

**“Dreams are extremely important, you can’t do it unless you can imagine it?”**  
Muhammad Ali

### **Visualisation: forming or recalling pictures in the imagination**

It is the tension between an unsatisfactory current reality and a clearly defined future that creates disorder. Once we have disorder then we have the drive and creativity to create a new order.

If current reality is stronger than the goal we will after a little progress, return to current reality and we will give up on the goal. We will rationalise, make excuses and allocate blame. Our RAS also comes into play once we create a vision or goal and have declared a new significance. Once we have made something significant our RAS opens and information and opportunities stream towards us. That is why it is not important to know the details of how to achieve our goal when we first make it.

To help us to reach our goals we can purposefully use visualisation techniques to imagine ourselves having reached the goal. As the mind does not distinguish in its reactions to memories or imagination, we can create a picture in our minds full of colour, movement, sounds, words, images, people, results etc that show us we've been successful and then we get the feelings that come with that success. We can make the future accessible now to our brains and rehearse our achievements before we get to them.

These techniques, most commonly used by athletes across all sports, are becoming much more prevalent in their use in organisation to galvanise individuals and team to reach their goals by giving the mind a vivid and compelling representation of a future to reach for. The ultimate in discrepancy production. As our minds in essence work the same way as that of an athlete we can call upon these amazing capabilities in any realm of our lives.

When we know the facts as they are now and we have a clear picture of our goal then the dissonance between them (or the gap between what we have now and what we want) will release our energy and creativity to make reality match the vision and so resolve the conflict. A further aspect of goal setting is the importance of commitment. Any compromise with the goal will lead to the creative subconscious switching off the energy and creativity needed for success.

We can also use our RAS to increase our success as a goal setter. By articulating our goals clearly, our creative subconscious provides us with energy and creativity to tackle the problems for which we have made ourselves accountable.

**Belief: Faith in the ability to reach a goal without needing to know in detail the means by which it will be achieved**

Set your goals first and then have the belief that you will figure out how to achieve it. Trying to work out exactly how to proceed in achieving your goal before you start is often ineffective because if you set your mind quickly on how you will achieve it then your mind is satisfied, it has the answer and stops searching. Your RAS is shut, there is no discrepancy and therefore no dissonance, your mind is asleep to all of the new and different ideas and information available to you.

Because you have decided that you 'know' how to achieve your goal you have locked on to only one way of achieving it, or perhaps you have decided quickly that it is unachievable. Needing to know how you will achieve a goal before you start can limit the size of your goals because you limit your goal setting to the level of your know-how, not to the level of your potential.

Knowing this means you can now set yourself bigger and bigger goals and really stretch your performance. Setting yourself a goal that you are committed to and passionate about comes first. The how then follows because your goal has a declared new importance and significance to you, therefore opening your RAS and enabling information and solutions to become apparent to you.

As we go through the programme you are going to learn more about your mind. Even though this learning will only scratch the surface of what psychology has found, it will be enough to show that each of us has a vast untapped potential to grow and develop. When you know a little more about the muscle called your mind and consciously use and strengthen it, then you will achieve even better results.

If we set a goal to cycle to Brussels, we need to know our current location in order to get a clear picture of the goal. If we are in Diegem it's not such a big deal, but if we are currently in Madrid then that's quite a different picture.

## Personal Responsibility

Habits and attitudes are two vitally important aspects of our subconscious. This section seeks to explain how the subconscious takes over many tasks for us, such as typing and driving, saving our energy and thoughts. We will also examine how when we are trying to grow and develop, our old habits may hold us back, and limit our growth and development. In the same way, as how our attitudes can help us achieve our goals or get in the way.

**Attitude:** An internal, emotional orientation that partly explains the actions of a person; also, the direction you lean in relation to your goal

We may have been told, at some point, that we have a bad attitude. Have we ever been told how to change that attitude? Unlikely. In fact, often the people who have told us about our bad attitude not only cannot tell us how to change it, they cannot properly describe it, and often don't really know what an attitude is.

A great definition is taken from the aerospace industry. Pilots define the attitude of their plane as simply the direction in which it leans in relation to the horizon. The plane is either flying parallel to the horizon or leaning above or below it.

We can, therefore define an attitude as the direction we are leaning in relation to a fixed point, in our case our goal or our vision. Do you lean towards your goals? If you do, then you have a positive attitude that will help you succeed. If you lean away from your goal then you have a negative attitude that will contribute to your failure.

We are not talking about good or bad, just negative or positive. When we have a positive attitude, we lean towards something and seek it subconsciously. We invent ways of getting the things that we want and like. In contrast, we develop a negative attitude when we lean away from something because we believe or perceive that it will bring us pain, discomfort, or negative circumstances. Again, we do this subconsciously rather than consciously. Our subconscious will be very creative about helping us avoid what we think will be unpleasant for us. Negative attitudes, however, don't allow us to release our potential.

The vital point to remember is that we are not born with our attitudes; we acquire them. We acquire them from our own experience of life and learning and also from the people we surround ourselves with. They are second nature and we can control them.

There is a further, extremely important point to consider – our attitudes are neutral, until we set a goal. If we are shy, it is neither negative nor positive until we set a goal. If for instance our goal were to be an actor or actress then shyness would be negative. But if we want to be a writer, a lighthouse keeper or around the world solo sailor, then shyness might be a positive asset.

We need to consider carefully whether our attitudes help us go after the goal or whether they get in the way. The result is, more often than not, we give up on our goal when what we really need to do is change our attitude.

To make use of these ideas we need to do some good reflective thinking and be honest with ourselves. That way we will begin to see which of our attitudes are holding us back. Then we can actively decide to change them.

For example, most people reading this piece would not give a second thought about the appropriateness of a woman wearing a t-shirt and jeans. There is no problem about women wearing what has historically been male clothing. Contrast that attitude with how men would feel about having to wear dresses. It's likely that most of them would be horrified. Yet it wasn't so long ago that society would have expressed (and in some places still expresses) the same horror at the t-shirt and jeans that are acceptable for women here and now. Hence transgender or cross-dressing people can have a hard time from others. An attitude that seems so ingrained in our sense of who we are is actually not necessarily a permanent fixture.

The attitudes we have about the colour of people, about the role of women, about race, religions, about the kind of people we are, about what colleagues in our teams are capable of, and so on are second nature. We have acquired them. They can be changed.

**Habit: a pattern of activity, which through repetition has become automatic. This is second nature**

Our habits also form part of our second nature. Driving a car, using a computer, playing golf or tennis, all of these need to become habits if we are to be good at them. They are very complex activities that are difficult for our conscious mind to handle. Therefore, by repetition we put the pattern into our subconscious. We practice perfection so that it becomes second nature. More accurately, we could say, that it is the practice of perfection that makes perfect.

Take Wayne Rooney, who has scored a multitude of goals so far in his career. Has his record been achieved just through sheer instinct? Not according to Ole Gunnar Solskjær, the Manchester United reserve team manager *"He has really worked on the training ground on repeating himself. That is what it is all about as a striker, getting your repetition in and then acting on instinct rather than having to think about it when you get on the pitch"*

All high-performance sports people know that once we have a habit established it is best to leave it alone. Thinking too hard about a habit interferes with its ease of operation. Strikers on a bad scoring run, golfers with the putting 'yips', basketball players missing free throws – all get into a cycle of failure because they become over-conscious about their technique.

Habits enable us to do complicated things more easily, BUT they have their disadvantages. Once we have acquired a habit of working, if we are asked to change, it upsets us. It throws our system out of balance. We are often comfortable with our existing practice, it feels familiar and comfortable and we therefore may resent acquiring new habits.

One technique that can help with this process of change is to practice the changes in our mind, in advance and in comfort; then the new will not be so strange and unfamiliar – using the visualisation techniques we have started to build in you. We can also give the same skills to our colleagues and loved ones. We can rehearse the new future in our mind. Creating this strong, exciting and positive vision of the new habit will give us the motivation to change.

**Visualisation: Forming or recalling pictures in the imagination**

Many sports people use this technique. They do not need to be on the pitch or on the golf course to practice the swing or the free kick; they can rehearse in the comfort of their armchair or shower! The most effective way to visualise is by using the first person, present tense ("I see myself in the future, doing, having, being, the 'thing' that I want.") and when you have changed your own picture of yourself on the inside, the external changes will follow on the outside.

The technique is not about trying hard to imagine yourself in different circumstances but instead about changing your view of yourself (self-image) and changing the image you have stored in your subconscious about your effectiveness. You need to practise the skill of being able to visualise yourself in the self-image that you need to meet your goals.

A study conducted by Dr. Blaslotto at the University of Chicago\* demonstrated the role of visualisation with Basketball players. He split people into three groups and tested each group on how many free throws they could make. After this session, he had the first group practice free throws every day for an hour. The second group just visualised themselves making free throws and the third group did nothing.

After 30 days, he tested them all again. The first group had improved by 24%, the second group improved by 23% without even touching the basketball! The third group did not improve as expected.

Visualisation is not a short cut that will suffice without practical application. However imagine what you could do if you implemented both practice and the mental rehearsal technique of visualisation. The sky is the limit! This technique works equally well for improving any aspect of your performance.

To be really effective you need to involve as many of your senses as possible. The combination of sight, sound and emotion really enhances the effectiveness of visualising. There are some important things to consider when visualising. In the basketball example, if you were to picture yourself shooting free throws in the third person, as if it was a movie, you probably won't improve as much as you could.

You need to visualise everything as through your own eyes (eg in the first person). You have to be there at the free throw line feeling the basketball, seeing the goal, hearing and feeling the emotion of the crowd as they cheer you on, as you shoot. You should FEEL the ball roll off your fingers. You should SEE the ball travelling through the air with a perfect backspin. You should SEE your hands out in front of you holding the follow through as you HEAR and SEE the ball swish through the net and SEE and HEAR the crowd getting to their feet and cheering.

Once, you do this, you're guaranteed results. Think about how you could use and practice this technique in your life.

*Going back to the basketball game, the next bit seems obvious...*

During the basketball trial, the coach was discussing the concept of visualisation and the importance of mental rehearsal every day. He asked the players to go home and visualise themselves shooting 10 free throws before they went to bed. However, he had forgotten to mention to visualise every shot going through the hoop! The next day some of the players were telling the coach about it. Jokingly, he asked a few of the players, "So, how many shots did you make?" (assuming that everybody had made 10). A couple of the players said they had made 10, but a number of the players said they had only made seven or eight of the 10 shots! So, be careful to ensure you can

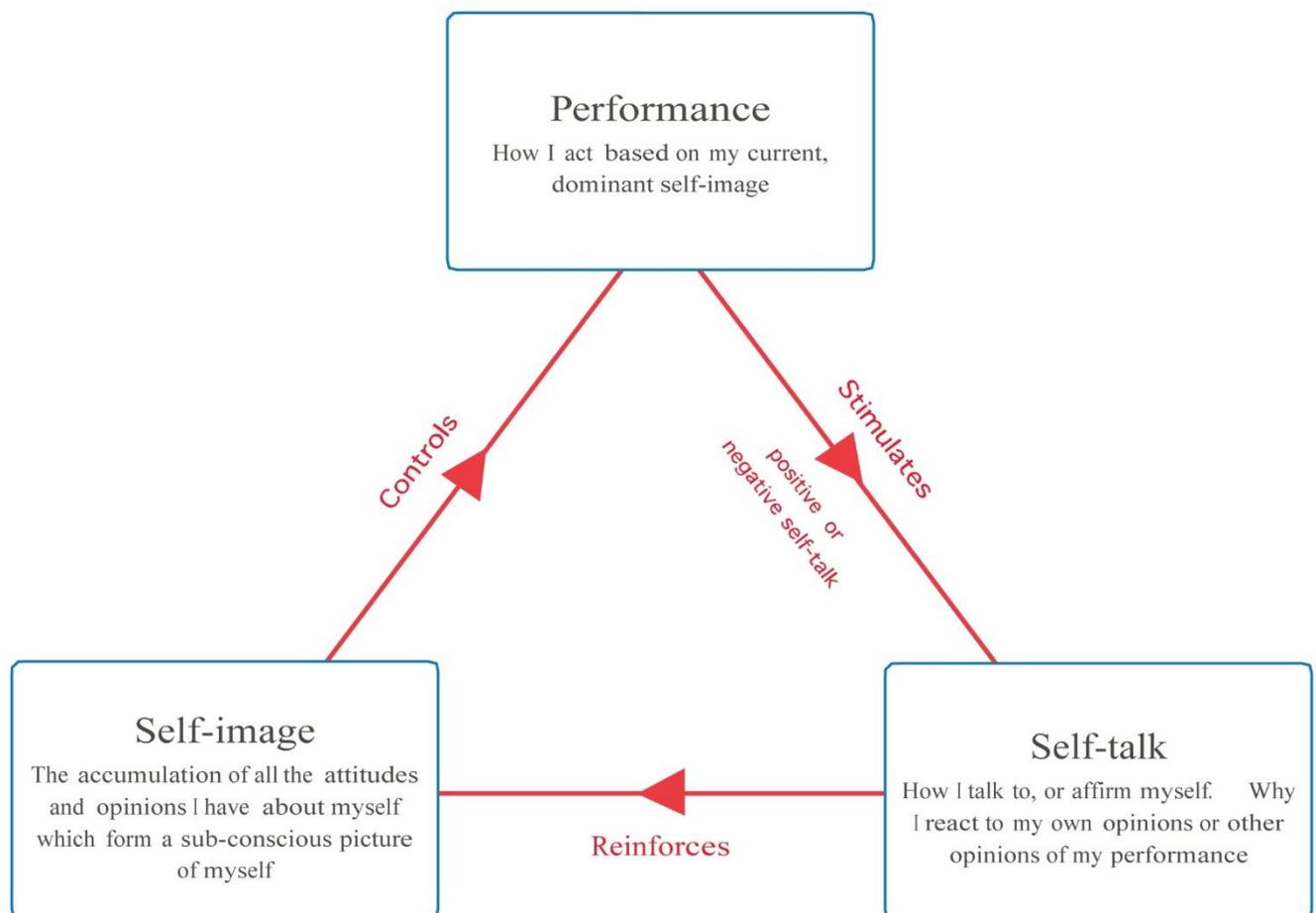
actually see the success you want. It might be that you have to work harder in the early stages at creating a picture that you can really feel.

All real and lasting change starts on the inside. This is a challenging concept to get to grips with and may conflict with your current attitudes and beliefs, as it is likely to directly counter how you've been taught to learn new skills previously.

## Self - Talk

Self-talk is simply the conversation that each of us is carrying on with ourselves all day long. We think six times faster than we read or speak. It is estimated that about fifty thousand thoughts go through our mind every day. Each of those thoughts has an impact on our feelings and performance, and they are all recorded in the neuron structure of the cells of our brain. Every thought about every experience we have ever had is also recorded, and we can access those thoughts without having to repeat the experience.

Every time we recollect, that thought, as far as our subconscious is concerned, is as if the original experience is being repeated. Our subconscious mind does not distinguish between reality and imagination.



Taken together, all these thoughts and their associated experiences contribute to building up our own image of our self, and our world. Once we have built a belief about our self, that belief will become the internal standard by which our creative subconscious self regulates us.

This is an important point for those of you who are parents, or who play an important role in a child's life, likewise if you're a manager. Older people, parents, teachers, even older brothers and sisters often give opinions to children about how clever or stupid they are. Managers often give a view of an individual's capability – directly or implied. Children, not knowing any better, frequently agree with them, or, as the psychologists say, 'give sanction' to this evaluation of themselves. Many adults do this too. In other words, they accept the feedback and then store it in their subconscious as a 'truth'. Sometimes we give too much power to parents, teachers and managers to determine the kinds of people we are and the levels of performance we can achieve. Once we have locked on to someone else's opinion of us, it can quickly become one of our own self-images.

### **Self-image: the imagined self in any aspect of life; the self one supposes oneself to be**

We need to listen more critically to the opinions others have formed of us and only give sanction to them when we have decided that they are true. We cannot stop others evaluating us but we are still accountable for accepting or rejecting those opinions. We need to teach this to others that we interact with.

### **Sanction: to agree with or approve**

Giving sanction to others' opinions applies not only to the negative things that we think or are said to us, it also applies to the compliments that are paid to us. When we devalue ourselves we lower our self-image and we self-regulate at that level. When we improve our self-image through positive self-talk we raise our internal standard and we self-regulate at that level.

So, if someone praises you it will not help you grow and develop unless you accept the compliment constructively. Of course this doesn't just happen over one remark or thought but over time if you let enough of it in then it can have a very positive impact on your self-image and hence your self-talk and performance. A long time ago it was written: 'As a man thinketh in his heart so is he'. Therefore, be mindful about what you think! You can change your life and your performance by changing your thinking.

Being part of a group also contributes to our self-image. Working as part of a team we share a self-image created by the thoughts, speech and acts of everyone in the team and we conform to this in varying degrees. Team self-images can have a positive and negative impact on our personal performance depending on the nature of the self-talk and overall performance of that team.

To illustrate the ups and downs of a team self-image consider how a positive way to increase our performance in a game of badminton is to join a high performing team and take on all that comes with being part of that team – the positive talk of the 'winning team', the stretch to our performance on and off the court by playing with others who perform well or better than you, and the celebrations of success that you enjoy when the team wins. Equally consider the impact on your performance if you belonged to a group of people who were constantly under-performing, negative, and who did not stretch or inspire your performance. Over time this would impact on your self-image and will likely have a negative impact on your personal performance.

The most positive way of helping people improve their performance is to:

- build up the person's self-esteem, reinforce their strengths and successes, and demonstrate your belief in their ability
- help them picture, as vividly as possible, the best way of doing it next time so they can start to see and feel what success is like and create new self-images.

**Humility:** A true estimate of one's ability and the recognition that one has never achieved anything entirely by oneself

If we are always talking positively and constructively about ourselves, does this mean we are being big-headed or boastful? Most of us have been brought up to see boastfulness as a vice and humility as a virtue; but it can be humility which encourages us to not think well of ourselves. This is because we disregard an essential characteristic of true humility – 'always recognise the truth about yourself'.

Humility is to have a true appreciation of your own worth. When you are paid a genuine compliment you shouldn't reject it. Instead thank the person who has complemented you and give credit out loud to those who have contributed to your success. Then praise yourself (internally, in your own thoughts) for your own contribution to the success.

People with true humility:

- give thanks
- give credit out loud to others for their help
- give credit to yourself for your part quietly and personally.

Too many of us pass through our successes too quickly. What we need to do is revisit them, privately, and give ourselves credit for our past achievements.

Research shows that efficacious people repeat their successes to themselves in their imagination. This helps them become more efficacious. When David Beckham rehearses his free kicks over and over again in his mind, he relives the success and the positive feelings the success gave him. He then uses these feelings and emotions positively to support his next performance.

We need to be careful in our roles as authority figures to others (e.g. as managers, parents and advisors) in the way we speak to people who we are responsible for.

In summary, your self-talk is vital and one of the most important tools you have at your disposal to improve your performance. You need to cut out all the negative, destructive, devaluing things that you think and say – firstly for yourself and then to help those round you improve their own self-image and self-talk.

First Nature is what we've inherited. Second nature is what we choose to do with our first nature. Our habits and attitudes are stored subconsciously, and they help us remain who we are daily without effort. Change is difficult in terms of our neurobiology and neuronal wiring and our own self talk. In order to make change sustainable we need become fully accountable to ourselves changing from the inside, by creating a strong compelling image of the goal or vision of what we want. This is where affirmations goal setting and statements of purpose are very powerful.