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### It All Begins With a Plan

Have you ever been to the grocery store and realized you had forgotten your list? You know what happens. You end up with a cart full of stuff you don't need and when you get home you realize you've forgotten some things that you did need! Well, this is a perfect analogy for people who operate without goals and the plans to achieve them.

In order to make sure that you achieve our goals, you need a plan. Daily, weekly, and long-term planning keeps you pointed in the right direction both personally and professionally.

Goal setting begins with a goal statement. A goal statement should be a clear, brief summary of the objective and the time frame within which we want to operate.

Compare these two statements:

*"I want to go back to school."*

*"I will complete my IT certification within one year beginning December 31, 2001."*

The first statement is too vague to act upon. The second statement is much more specific and includes a start time and a completion date. Your goal should also be measurable - some way to clearly signal success. This might be obtaining a degree, losing x-number of pounds, or making a certain number of sales within a month.

Next, goal planning should include some tie to your values. Maybe going back to school is not exciting to you, but it supports your career growth, which is very important. There may not be a direct link, but if you cannot tie your goal back to something you value highly, you probably will not be dedicated to its completion.

Your goal should be ambitious, but achievable. Force yourself to stretch in order to reach your goal, but don't place its achievement so far out of reach that you set yourself up for failure. Talk to others, if necessary, to form a realistic time frame and to assess the effort involved.

List the steps for achieving your goal. For example, if your goal is to obtain an MBA within two years, you will need to research programs, find funding, get support from family members, schedule classes, etc. Write the steps on index cards and then sort them in chronological order. Include dates for beginning and finishing each step. Even the most daunting goals can be broken down into smaller, less intimidating steps. What resources will you need to accomplish your goal? Resources include time, money, other people, and materials. If your goal is to be able to run three miles under 30 minutes within the next 3 months, you will need proper shoes (which cost money), time to train, support from your family, etc.

You will need to examine whether you have the right skills to accomplish your goal. If you do not, determine how you will get the skills you need to be successful. If your goal is to be promoted within the next year, you will need to speak to your manager and perhaps others already in the targeted position to determine which skills are required. Then you will need to outline how you expect to gain those skills.

You should examine potential challenges that may surface as you work towards your goal. It is important that this step does not become a list of all the reasons you cannot succeed. Instead, it is a realistic assessment of what actions you can take to address the challenges as they come along. For example, if you are trying to lose weight and you know the holidays are coming along, what can you do to stay within the boundaries of your diet and exercise regimen?

You will be your own best coach along the way. Think of ways you can encourage and reward yourself as you accomplish key steps and, ultimately, your final goal. Often, the achievement of the goal is reward enough, but sometimes you may become discouraged and will need a little boost. Enlist support from family and friends as well. Advertising your goal to others is often an incentive to stick with it.

Finally, schedule the steps into your calendar. Give them a high priority. In other words, put them in your "cart" before it is filled up with stuff that you don't value as highly.

By formulating a long-term plan and incorporating the steps into your daily and weekly planning, you will accomplish your goals.

**Joyce Thompson**

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