

Whose Mission Are You Living?: The Whys and Wherefores of Goal-setting

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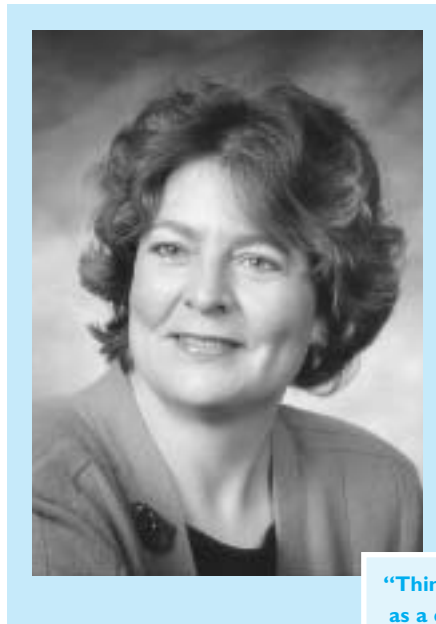
❖ “Three things are needed for people to be happy in their work: they must be fit for it, must not do too much of it, and must have a sense of success in it.”—Ruskin

❖ “I always wanted to be somebody but I should’ve been more specific.”—Lily Tomlin

❖ “I don’t know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody.”—Bill Cosby

A high percentage of physicians and scientists consider their profession a vocation, that is, a calling that will never be just a “job.” This commitment and sense of purpose are virtually prerequisite to the long process of acquiring the necessary expertise. To be sure, career-building begins with this “know-how” (i.e., technical skills), but that is only the beginning. Successful careers also depend on “knowing why,” that is, continuing insights into the sources of your motivation and energy.

It is never too early or too late to work at expanding this understanding of yourself, but this work is critical for early-career professionals. Many young physicians accept faculty appointments with only vague goals and little insight into the opportunities and demands. An annual review with their department head may reveal stark differences between their hopes and preferences and the chair’s expectations. For instance, Dr. New expects her leadership of the medicine clerkship and residency program and her service on two admissions committees to win her points; but her chair’s only comments during her 15-minute review pertain to bringing in more grant dollars and upping her clinical productivity. In the face of such an apparent misalignment, four types of less-than-optimal reactions are common: (1) get mad at the boss; (2) work even more hours (difficult if the work week already exceeds 60 hours and you have many responsibilities at home); (3) go into



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denial, i.e., pretend that the conflict will disappear; or (4) leave without careful evaluation or exploration of options.

A more analytical approach begins with articulating your personal mission or vision statement and the professional goals that grow logically from your values. Moving from reactive to clearly directed choices, and accepting responsibility for managing your own career, trigger an executive consciousness. Focusing energies and clear intentions also: engage your commitment; help you envision options; allow more efficient targeting of time, support, and mentoring; and are more likely to attract resources. Asking deep questions about priorities also may trigger new perceptions that lead to more effective behaviors. No wonder individuals with goals are far more likely to achieve successes (hitchhikers with signs get twice as many rides as those without).

Writing down your goals is important. If your commitments are simply stored in

your “psychic RAM,” what is stored is invariably over- or under-used; you recall items based on “most recent” or “loudest.” Because psychic RAM is such terrible “office space,” David Allen recommends a “Core Brain Dump”—capturing everything that pops in, preferably when in an energized state. Then later, thinking like the CEO of your career, return to your list and make decisions on which goals and activities you will commit to. Next, come back in a managerial role and make tactical decisions regarding timing and resources, etc. Written goals are especially helpful when making decisions about committing your time. With your goals fresh in mind (you may wish to keep a copy in your wallet), your decisions about commitments will be more reliable and you can say “no”—or a limited “yes”—with greater integrity and clarity.

Because women and minorities face extra challenges in making the most of their intellectual capital, goal-setting is especially critical. Not only do women and minorities lack role models who resemble them, but many also inherit a “personal glass ceiling” from our culture, limiting their achievement orientation so that they “settle for less.” They also encounter more pressures to devote themselves to community service and need help protecting their time if they are to advance. But they are less likely than majority men to garner effective mentoring and, hence, may never penetrate the complex politics of resource allocation. The earlier that women and minorities understand these realities, the more effective their strategies will be.

Getting Started

Do you ever wish you could just dial “1-800-VISION” for insights into how to

achieve your mission and goals? Even though you may well have felt “called” to medicine or science, by the time you finish training, your sense of this calling has likely matured in unexpected directions. A call is only a monologue, but unfolding your potential requires frequent dialogue with whatever is calling you.

If you have never or not recently, articulated your hopes for your life and career, here are some suggestions meant to stimulate your self-examination. First, visualize your ideal work and life situations. Visualization helps engage your mind more fully. Analytic types tend to over-rely on the well-developed logic-oriented left brain, not giving the nonverbal right brain a chance for input. Your creative right brain is better at transcending immediate circumstances and scripting, but you may need to jumpstart your access to it.

With the reality of longer life expectancy, rather than pushing to the point of burnout early in one’s career, it is wiser to adopt a long-term perspective to career management.

To get started, try:

- ❖ Examining what you daydream about and what gives you energy. During what activities do you lose track of time? Perform beyond your normal capabilities? Consistently feel enthusiastic and engaged?

- ❖ “Scenario building” with a forward-looking friend in a field other than your own. Imagining a series of “what-ifs,” with regard to the environment and your own development, allows a questioning of your usual assumptions and a fresh look at the world.

- ❖ Writing your obituary or a tribute statement you would like to have said of you on your 80th birthday.

- ❖ Keeping a pad and pen by your bed to write down dreams. Dreams are the imagination at work during sleep. While some are clearly junk mail, dreams are also uniquely reliable “meaning machines.” Try a “direct request”; you may be surprised at the response from your unconscious.

Now back to relying on your left brain. Assess what “businesses” you are investing your energies in; then calculate a return on investment in terms of your life satisfaction.

Another left-brain exercise is to categorize your professional activities in terms of high, medium, and low impact. Most people get about 80% of their impact from 20% of their activities.

Setting Value-based Goals

What goals grow naturally from your responses to the above exercises? Think of your goals as a developmental plan—that is, your goals should stretch and challenge you, but not defeat you. Young professionals might begin by sketching out short-term, mid-range, and long-term goals; you may wish to focus only on professional growth or include family considerations, spiritual growth, and physical health as well. With aims that require a lot of juggling or depend on unpredictable forces, thinking in terms of three- to five-year intervals of relative emphases may help, e.g., de-emphasizing

underestimating or overestimating your potential and the value you add to your department? Have you taken into account your weaknesses and problem areas? Encourage your confidants to be specific regarding their perceptions of your strengths and weaknesses. If you could benefit from more focused assistance with this and with your action plan, consider partnering with a career coach.

Priorities change with life stages and as new constraints and options present themselves. So take inventory on a regular basis, e.g. make time on your birthday or New Year’s Day to review your past year’s calendar: What do you want to spend more time on? Less time on? Is what you give your time to what you value? Your review might also encompass your assets, e.g., which skills were most important to your impact and achievements this year? What competencies do you need to acquire or to build? To free up energy for this new work, what are you not doing well or not enjoying that you can delegate or discontinue?

Retaining a copy of your annual goals and updates produces, over time, an invaluable record of your own development. Another benefit of a regular goal review is remaining in touch with your emotional, developmental and financial realities. Finally, your inventory can serve as the basis from which you approach your annual review with your boss.

Despite these benefits, many professionals resist such a close self-examination. Perhaps longings may be revealed that would complicate life; how much simpler to continue to tune them out than to examine new possibilities. Also, to some overachievers, to write down a goal and then not achieve it may risk what feels like “failure”—though that label is rarely accurate. So the path of least resistance is to stick with old answers and strategies. This path leads to a tombstone that might read: “Anne Assistant Professor (1945-2023): She could’ve done some really great stuff but her chair wouldn’t let her.”

The Long View

Most young professionals in medicine and science feel overwhelmed by deadlines, in part because promotion requirements presume the existence of “ideal workers” who devote themselves wholly to their work, nev-

research productivity during the years before your children begin school. For goals not directly dictated by a promotion clock, “when” is usually less important than relationships and contexts, i.e. “what/why/how.”

Within these constraints, be as specific as possible. For example, one year’s professional development goals might include: complete and submit four manuscripts; decrease time in clinic by 10%; reduce staff attrition by 25%; establish regular contact with at least 10 new contacts. To be sure, goals only set the stage for the “rubber meets the sky” work of execution, which entails the discipline, for instance, to get up an hour earlier each morning to write grants. And obviously having clear goals represents only the beginning of Dr. New’s renegotiation with her chair about priorities. But in their next discussion, she will be much better prepared to both strategically articulate her values and to look realistically at her fit within the department.

To test your goals, talk over your outline with people worthy of your trust. Ask if you have considered the threats and opportunities looming on the horizon. Are you

er seeking time away from work during their twenties and thirties. But aging is no longer a steady linear decline; rare is the healthy person who feels “over the hill” at age 60. This longer life expectancy means more than a simple addition of years at the end of life; these years are more like an atrium in the center, encouraging new ways of thinking about life balance and energy management. So rather than pushing to the point of burnout early in one’s career, it is wiser to adopt a long-term perspective to career management. Few professionals with multi-layered commitments will build careers in a linear fashion. Career trajectories are now more likely to undulate and include more plateaus and spirals. Compared to the days when a health life-span was shorter, individuals who prefer to do so may have two or three careers over five or more active decades.

Faculty adopting a long-term perspec-

tive and seeking more flexibility than personnel and promotion policies allow may find themselves head-to-head with administrators pressured to increase productivity now if not sooner. This is a system-wide challenge. But as leaders in academic medicine recognize their dependence on the next generation, they will likely update these policies in order to recruit and retain young physicians. Visionary leaders understand that in the long-run, productivity is dependent on employee satisfaction and creativity; therefore nurturing the development of people is the smartest business strategy. At the same time, smart “knowledge-workers” understand that organizations often do not “love you back” and accept responsibility for managing their own careers from the start.

Goals are no protection against the inevitable uncertainties of life. But your

“whys” will help keep you wise as you build your career. Career happiness is not a function of Brownian motion but of continuing exploration of the intersection between your skills and what you find most meaningful and most enjoyable. ❖

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Notes

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