

Reprinted from

# *The Nolan Newsletter*

*People, Process, Technology*

Third Quarter 2003

## A Goal is a Dream with a Deadline



By Ron Zimmer  
Senior Consultant  
Robert E. Nolan  
Company, Inc.

Wanting to get a feel for morale, in a recent employee survey I asked the question, “How is your motivation?” One of the responses was, “Motivation to do what?”

Motivation is sparked by goals. Simply stated, goals are things you want to accomplish. They provide direction and help answer the following questions:

- What are our desired results?
- Where can we, with our limited resources (people, money, competence) really make a difference?
- What are our criteria for success?
- What do we want to accomplish first? What are our priorities?

Meaningful goals need to be realistic. Motivating goals need to be a stretch—somewhat difficult, a little risky, slightly dangerous and, above all, engaging. We see that effective goal making has three components:

1. **Set goals that make a difference.** Set goals that stretch traditional expectations but that are attainable.
2. **Don’t stray from these goals.** Measure and hold people accountable.
3. **Lead.** Set a tone of urgency and support implementation.

### Set Effective Goals

We commonly think of goals as something external to ourselves. Something that is out there, that we can either reach or ignore. But for people who have internalized the goals, they become a driving force—a passion—and cannot be ignored.

A useful exercise to clarify and add meaning to your goals is to imagine that that goal is fully realized. Then ask yourself the question, “If I actually had this, what would it get me?” What you may discover is that the answer reveals deeper desires lying behind the goal.

Your subconscious also has to believe in the goal. If not, for the same reason that lie detectors work, internal stress will distract and limit motivation. The subconscious is especially receptive to the “right” goals—goals that are inline with your, and the organization’s, aspirations and values.

Stretch goals force people to let go of conventional wisdom and comfortable situations. By driving creativity and innovation, they help people be able to think about and see the world differently. Stretch goals accelerate change.

### Don’t Stray, Measure

Once underway, the next question is usually, “How are we doing. To what extent have we achieved the results?” To help answer that, a measurement system needs to be developed to track progress.

Measures may be organized into key result areas and displayed in scoreboards or dashboards. No matter how you report on progress, establish a strong monitoring and control system so you know what is happening, when and where; if there is a problem you will then know about it quickly and can take action before it becomes bigger or gets out of control.

Measures support accountability. Management should ask questions like, “Are we on schedule?” and “How well are we using our resources?” If there is a problem, managers need to be removing roadblocks, applying resources and, when absolutely necessary, making course corrections.

Creative tension, or the desire to reach the goal, becomes an energizing force. Emotional tension, or the anxiety from the goal, is a negative force that can be compounded by discouragement, hopelessness and worry. Overcome the fears by providing enough support that people don't lower the tension by lowering the goal.

Interim goals are important. Recognize and appreciate progress as it occurs. It might take years to achieve major goals, but short-term targets make it easier to be patient regarding long-term goals. Also, watch for unanticipated accomplishments because many times important accomplishments are neither predicted in advance nor appreciated when they occur.

### **Execute**

Execution is the critical part of any successful goal and strategy. Getting it done, getting it done right, getting it done better than the next person is far more important than dreaming up new goals or visions of the future. All the great companies in the world out-execute their competitors in the marketplace.

Great institutions are driven to ever-increasing levels of accomplishment by leaders who are passionate about winning. According to IBM's ex-chief Louis Gerstner, effective execution is built on three attributes of an institution: world-class processes, strategic clarity and high-performance culture.

In high-performance cultures, leaders set demanding goals, measure results and hold people

accountable. They are change agents, constantly driving their institutions to adapt and advance faster than their competitors do. And they roll up their sleeves and tackle problems personally.

The value of goals comes from the combination of what the goal is and what it does for the organization. Goals make mission, vision and values become real. They make the organization and the people in the organization more important.

No one in the organization should ever have to ask, "Motivation to do what?"§

---

Without goals,  
you cannot plan.

Without plans,  
you cannot control.

Without control,  
you cannot manage.

Either yourself or others.

---