

# An integrated model of goal-focused coaching: An evidence-based framework for teaching and practice

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*There is a considerable body of literature on goals and goal setting in the psychological literature, but little of this has found its way into the scholarly coaching literature. This article draws on the goal-setting literature from the behavioural sciences. It discusses a range of approaches to understanding the goal construct, presents a definition of goals relevant to coaching, and details a new and comprehensive model of goal-focused coaching that can be helpful both in teaching and in applied coaching practice. It also outlines new empirical research that highlights the vital role that coaches' goal-focused coaching skills play in determining successful coaching outcomes. This preliminary research suggests that the use of a goal-focused coaching style is more effective than a 'common factors' or person-centred coaching style in facilitating goal attainment in coaching. It is argued that, by understanding the different types of goals and their relationship to the process of change, professional coaches can work more efficiently with their clients, helping them to achieve insight and behavioural change that enhances their workplace performance, their professional working lives and, most importantly, their personal well-being and sense of self.*

**Keywords:** Goals; goal theory; evidence-based coaching; executive coaching.

**A**LTHOUGH COACHING is typically thought of as being a goal-focused activity, the use of goals in coaching is somewhat controversial. Common arguments against the use of goal setting in coaching include the propositions that goal setting is an overly-linear process that constricts the coaching conversation and acts as a barrier to working with emergent issues within the complex dynamic system that is the coaching conversation; or that goal setting is associated with coaches cajoling coachees in the blind pursuit of a previously-set but inappropriate goal, leading to 'lazy' join-the-dots mechanistic coaching; or even that goals typically focus on issues that may be easy to measure but are of little real importance (see Clutterbuck, 2008, 2010).

Some coaches say that they never use goals in coaching, rather they assert that as coaches their role is to help clients explore their values, clarify their intentions, and

then to help them achieve their personal aspirations. Yet others seem to steadfastly avoid using the word 'goal', but talk about helping clients chart a course, navigate the waters of life, foster transformational change, or re-author personal narratives. Goal setting has even gained a bad reputation in some sections of the academic psychology press, with some authors asking if goal setting has gone wild, and decrying the supposed over-prescription of goal setting (Ordóñez et al., 2009).

Whilst, some of these points have merit, goal theory *per se* has much to offer coaching research and practice. There is a considerable body of literature on goals and goal setting (Locke & Latham, 2002). A search of the database PsycINFO in May 2012 accessing the broader psychological literature base and using the keyword 'goals' found over 59,530 citations. Yet the academic literature on the use of goals within the area of executive coaching is far smaller, with the keywords

'goals' and 'executive coaching' producing only 30 citations. Most of these report on the various uses of goal setting in executive coaching practice (e.g. Bono et al., 2009; Lewis-Duarte, 2010; McKenna & Davis, 2009b; Stern, 2009; Sue-Chan, Wood & Latham, 2012), with a few empirical studies examining how executive coaching facilitates goal attainment (e.g. Benavides, 2009; Burke & Linley, 2007; Freedman & Perry, 2010; Grant, Curtayne & Burton, 2009; Milare & Yoshida, 2009; Schnell, 2005; Smither et al., 2003; Turner, 2004).

To date there have been surprisingly few articles detailing theoretical frameworks that explicitly link goal theory to executive or organisational coaching. Three key examples are Sue-Chan, Wood and Latham's (2012) work which explored the differences between promotion and prevention goals as a foci for coaching, and the role of implicit fixed beliefs about ability and implicit incremental beliefs on coaching outcomes; Gregory, Beck and Car's (2011) work which argues that control theory (in which goals and feedback are two crucial elements) can provide an important framework for coaching; and Grant's (2006) initial work on developing an integrative goal-focused approach to executive coaching.

This paper draws on and extends previous work (e.g. Grant, 2002, 2006, 2012; Gregory et al., 2011; Locke & Latham, 2002) and utilising the goal-setting literature from the behavioural sciences, discusses the concept of goal, presents a definition of goals that can be helpful in coaching practice and describes a new model of goal-focused coaching and new preliminary research that highlights the vital role that coaches' goal-focused skills play in determining successful coaching outcomes.

### **SMART goals can dumb-down coaching**

Goals and goal constructs have been extensively researched within academic psychology (Moskowitz & Grant, 2009), and sophisticated understandings of goals are evident within the broader psychological

literature. This is not the case within the coaching-related literature. From an overview of the coaching literature it appears that many coaches' understanding of goals is limited to acronyms such as SMART (originally delineated by Raia, 1965) and that typically goals are equated with being specific, measureable, attainable, relevant and timeframed action plans (note: the exact delineation of the SMART acronym varies between commentators).

Whilst the ideas represented by the acronym SMART are indeed broadly supported by goal theory (e.g. Locke, 1996), and the acronym SMART may well be useful in some instances in coaching practice, I think that the widespread belief that goals are synonymous with SMART action plans has done much to stifle the development of a more sophisticated understanding and use of goal theory within in the coaching community, and this point has important implications for coaching research, teaching and practice.

It is worth reflecting that acronyms such as SMART may provide useful mnemonics – mnemonics being memorable surface markers of deeper knowledge structures. However, the use of such mnemonics without a clear understanding of the deeper underpinning knowledge may well result in ill-informed decision making, and the cultivation of inaccurate practice doctrines and mythologies about goals and goal theory. Unfortunately, such misconceptions may make it even more difficult for practitioners to engage with the broader knowledge-base. Clearly, there is a case here for coach educators and trainers to draw more extensively on the broader goal theory literature. My hope is that this paper will make a contribution in encouraging this course of action.

### **What are goals?**

If this article is to make a meaningful contribution in terms of the more sophisticated use of goals and goal theory in coaching, it is important to develop a clear understanding of the goal construct. The term 'goal' is

generally understood as being ‘the purpose toward which an endeavour is directed; an objective or outcome’ (see, for example, [www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com)). Although such understandings are adequate for everyday use, a far more nuanced understanding of the goal construct is needed in coaching.

In attempting to develop more sophisticated understandings of the goal construct, a wide range of other terms have been used over the years including the terms ‘reference values’ (Carver & Scheier, 1998), ‘self-guides’ (Higgins, 1987), ‘personal strivings’ (Emmons, 1992), or ‘personal projects’ (Little, 1993). However, although such broad linguistic repertoires can be useful, the lack of precision in such definitions make it hard to distinguish between various aspects of the goal construct such as ‘aims’, ‘objectives’, ‘desires’ or ‘outcomes’, and they also fail to capture the true essence of the goal construct.

Goals are defined as playing a key role in transitions from an existing state to a desired state or outcome (e.g. Klinger, 1975; Spence, 2007). As such the goal construct has been variously defined in terms of cognitions (Locke, 2000), behaviour (Bargh et al., 2001; Warshaw & Davis, 1985) and affect (Pervin, 1982) (for further discussion on these points see Street, 2002). These three domains are of great relevance for coaching, and an understanding of goals for use in coaching should encompass all three domains.

Cochran and Tesser (1996) present a comprehensive description of a goal as ‘a cognitive image of an ideal stored in memory for comparison to an actual state; a representation of the future that influences the present; a desire (pleasure and satisfaction are expected from goal success); a source of motivation, an incentive to action’ (as cited in Street, 2002, p.100). This understanding of goals is particularly useful for coaching because, as Street (2002) points out, it emphasises the role of cognition (in terms of cognitive imagery), as well as affect and behaviour, in addition to the notion that the purpose of a goal as ‘a source of motiva-

tion and an incentive’. However, whilst this definition is more sophisticated than notions that situate goals as being synonymous with SMART action plans, it is still somewhat unwieldy as a working definition.

One definition that is succinct, captures the essence of the above issues and is clearly applicable to coaching is Austin and Vancouver’s (1996) notion of goals as being ‘internal representations of desired states or outcomes’ (p.388).

### **Goals as ‘internal representations of desired states or outcomes’ are central to coaching**

Although there are many definitions of coaching, all capture common themes. The Association for Coaching defines coaching as ‘A collaborative solution-focused, results-orientated and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of work performance, life experience, self-directed learning and personal growth of the coachee’ (AC, 2012). The International Coach Federation defines coaching as ‘partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential’ (ICF, 2012). The World Association of Business Coaches defines business coaching as a structured conversation designed to ‘enhance the client’s awareness and behaviour so as to achieve business objectives for both the client and their organisation’ (WABC, 2012). The European Mentoring and Coaching Council defines coaching (and mentoring) as ‘activities within the area of professional and personal development...to help clients...see and test alternative ways for improvement of competence, decision making and enhancement of quality of life...with the purpose of serving the clients to improve their performance or enhance their personal development or both...’ (EMCC, 2011).

It is clear that there is considerable agreement within professional coaching bodies about the nature of coaching. All of these definitions indicate that the process of

coaching is essentially about helping individuals regulate and direct their interpersonal and intrapersonal resources in order to create purposeful and positive change in their personal or business lives. In short then, all coaching conversations are either explicitly or implicitly goal-focused, and are about helping clients enhance their self-regulatory skills so as to better create purposeful positive change.

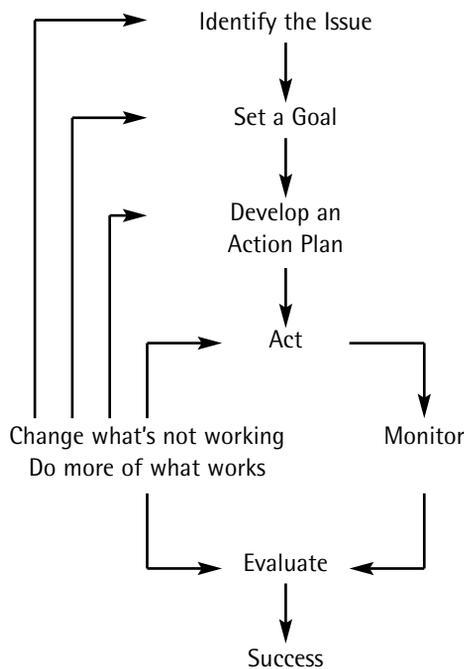
**Goal-focused self-regulation sits at the core of the coaching process**

The core constructs of self-regulation are a series of processes in which the individual sets a goal, develops a plan of action, begins action, monitors their performance, evaluates their performance by comparison to a standard, and based on this evaluation change their actions to further enhance their performance and better reach their

goals (Carver & Scheier, 1998). The coach's role is to facilitate the coachee's movement through the self-regulatory cycle, and onwards towards goal attainment. Figure 1 depicts a generic model of self-regulation (Grant, 2003).

In practice the steps in the self-regulatory cycle are not clearly separate stages. In practice, each stage overlaps with the next, and the coaching in each stage should aim to facilitate the process of the next. For example, goal setting should be done in such a way as to facilitate the development and implementation of an action plan. The action plan should be designed to motivate the individual into action, and should also incorporate means of monitoring and evaluating performance thus providing information on which to base follow-up coaching sessions (Grant, 2006). This self-regulatory cycle sits at the core of the coaching process.

Figure 1: Generic model of goal-directed self-regulation.



Knowing how and when to set goals in coaching, knowing how to gauge the client's readiness to engage in a robust and explicitly goal-focused conversation or when to work with more vaguely defined or more abstract goals, are skill sets that distinguishes the novice or beginner coach from more advanced or expert practitioners (Grant, 2011; Peterson, 2011). Having a solid understanding of the multi-faceted nature of goals is thus important in making the novice-expert shift, and are thus of relevance for both the teaching and practice of coaching. It is to this issue that we now turn.

### **Goals are not monolithic entities**

If we are to understand coaching through the lens of goal theory, it is important to distinguish between different types of goals. Goals are not monolithic. Indeed, there are over twenty types of goals that can be used in coaching. These include outcome goals, distal and proximal goals, approach and avoidance goals, performance and learning goals, and higher and lower order goals, as well as the actual results which the coachee aims to achieve. These distinctions are important because different types of goals impact differently on coachees' performance and their experience of the goal striving process.

### **Time framing: Distal and proximal goals**

The time framing of goals is an important part of the goal setting process, and time frames can influence the coachee's perception of the attainability of the goal (Karniol & Ross, 1996). *Distal* goals are longer term goals, and are similar to the vision statements often referred to in business or management literature or the 'broad fuzzy vision' referred to in the life-coaching literature (Grant & Green, 2004). *Proximal* goals are shorter term, and tend to stimulate more detailed planning than distal goals (Manderlink & Harackiewicz, 1984), and hence are important goals when used in action planning. In essence, the action steps typically derived in coaching sessions are a series of

short-term proximal goals. Combining both distal with proximal goals in the coaching and action planning process can lead to enhanced strategy development and better long-term performance (Weldon & Yun, 2000).

### **Outcome goals**

Many coaching programmes focus entirely on setting *outcome* goals. Such goals tend to be a straightforward statement of some desired outcome (Hudson, 1999); for example, 'to increase sales of widgets by 15 per cent in the next three months'. This is a useful approach to goal setting, because for individuals who are committed and have the necessary ability and knowledge, outcome goals that are difficult and are specifically and explicitly defined, allow performance to be precisely regulated, and thus often lead to high performance (Locke, 1996). Indeed, many coaching programmes focus purely on the setting of specific 'SMART' goals and this approach is indeed supported by some of the goal-setting literature (Locke & Latham, 2002).

However, there are times when overly-specific outcome goals will alienate the coachee, and may actually result in a decline in performance (Winters & Latham, 1996). For individuals who are in a highly deliberative mindset, it may be more useful to purposefully set more *abstract* or quite vague goals and focus on developing a broad 'fuzzy vision' (Grant & Greene, 2004), rather than drilling down into specific details and setting more *concrete* goals. For individuals at this point in the change process, vague or abstract goals are often perceived as being less threatening and less demanding (Dewck, 1986).

### **Avoidance and approach goals**

*Avoidance* goals are expressed as a movement away from an undesirable state, for example, 'to be less stressed about work'. Although this presents a desired outcome, as an avoidance goal it does not provide a specific outcome target or provide enough details

from which to define those behaviours which might be most useful during the goal striving process; there are almost an infinite number of ways one could become 'less stressed'. In contrast an *approach* goal is expressed as a movement towards a specific state or outcome, for example, 'to enjoy a fulfilling balance between work demands and personal relaxation', and these can indeed help define appropriate goal-striving behaviours.

Not surprisingly, there are differential effects associated with avoidance or approach goals. Coats, Janoff-Bulman, and Alpert (1996) found that people who tended to set avoidance goals had higher levels of depression and lower levels of well-being. Other studies have found that the long-term pursuit of avoidance goals is associated with decreases in well-being (Elliot, Sheldon & Church, 1997), and that approach goals are associated with both higher levels of academic performance and increased well-being (Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

### **Performance and learning goals**

*Performance* goals focus on task execution and are typically expressed as being competitive in terms of performing very well on a specific task, receiving positive evaluations from others about one's performance, or outperforming others. Performance goals tend to focus the coachee's attention on issues of personal ability and competence (Gresham, Evans & Elliott, 1988). An example of a performance goal in executive or workplace coaching might be 'to be the very best lawyer in my area of practice'. Performance goals can be very powerful motivators, especially where the individual experiences success early in the goal-attainment process.

However, it is not so well known that performance goals can in fact impede performance. This particularly the case when the task is highly complex or the goal is perceived as very challenging, and where the individual is not skilled or is low in self-efficacy, or where resources are scarce.

Furthermore, in highly competitive situations or when there are very high stakes, performance goals can foster cheating and a reluctance to co-operate with peers, and the corporate and business world is replete with such examples (Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001).

In many cases *learning* goals may better facilitate task performance (Seijts & Latham, 2001). Learning goals (sometimes referred to as mastery goals) focus the coachee's attention on the learning associated with task mastery, rather than on the performance of the task itself. An example of a learning goal in executive or workplace coaching might be 'learn how to be the best lawyer in my area of practice'. Learning goals tend to be associated with a range of positive cognitive and emotional processes including perception of a complex task as a positive challenge rather than a threat, greater absorption in the actual task performance (Deci & Ryan, 2002), and enhanced memory and well-being (Linnenbrink, Ryan & Pintrich, 1999). Furthermore, individual performance can be enhanced in highly complex or challenging situations when team goals are primarily framed as being learning goals, and the use of team-level learning goals can foster enhanced co-operation between team members (Kristof-Brown & Stevens, 2001). One benefit of setting learning goals is that they tend to be associated with higher levels of intrinsic motivation which in turn is associated with performance (Sarrazin et al., 2002).

The differences in the articulation of these different types of goals is more than a matter of mere semantics, because the way a goal is expressed has important implications for coachee engagement (Rawsthorne & Elliott, 1999), and coaches need to be attuned to such nuances if they are to work effectively within a goal-focused coaching paradigm.

### **Complementary and competing goals**

Coaches also need to be attuned to the existence of *competing or conflicting* goals. These occur when the pursuit of one goal inter-

feres with the pursuit of another goal. Some goal conflict is easy to identify, for example in the case of the two goals 'to spend more time with my family' and 'to put more time into work in order to get a promotion'. However, goal conflict may not always be immediately evident. For example, the goal 'to get my sales force to sell more products' may be in perceived conflict with the goal 'to have a more hands-off leadership style' if the coachee (a sales manager) finds delegation difficult and is used to a more controlling management style in dealing with his/her sales force (Grant, 2006).

The skill of the coach here is to help the coachee find ways to align seemingly conflicting goals and develop *complementary* goals, and Sheldon and Kasser (1995) have argued that such congruence is important in facilitating goal attainment and well-being.

### Unconscious goals?

Human beings are goal-orientated organisms. Without goals we could not exist as conscious sentient beings. Indeed, Carver and Scheier (1998) argue that all human behaviour is a continual process of moving towards or away from mental goal representations. This is not to say that all goals are consciously held. Under many conditions, we enact complex outcome-directed behaviours even though we may not have consciously set specific goals.

For example, I might be sitting at home writing an article on coaching, and decide to walk to the corner store to buy some biscuits so I can enjoy afternoon tea and biscuits at home. I am aware that I have been sitting at the desk writing for some hours, and that taking a walk will help maintain flexibility in my back, and I am keen to try to prevent the development of back problems as I get older. However, my overarching and consciously set goals are to get biscuits and then make and enjoy some afternoon tea. With this goal in mind, I put on my shoes, take my keys from the shelf, check my wallet, open the door, close and lock the door (to maintain home security and avoid loss of personal prop-

erty). I then walk to the store, taking care to look both ways as I cross the road (so as to avoid being knocked over by a car or other vehicles), find my way to the biscuit shelf, select my biscuits from a wide range of different biscuit products (some of which I don't like), chat with the store keeper about Saturday's football match, purchase my biscuits, return home safely (opening and then closing the front door behind me) and put the kettle on.

All of these individual actions themselves involve a goal of some kind and all influenced my behaviour at any point in time, yet hardly any of these goals were consciously set.

Because goal-states influence our behaviour even though we may not have consciously set specific goals, goal theory is particularly helpful in coaching contexts and as a means of understanding human behaviour. Goal theory can provide a framework from which to help clients explore, identify and then change unhelpful implicit goals in order to better facilitate purposeful positive change (for an informed discussion on how actions are initiated even though we are unconscious of the goals to be attained or their motivating effect on our behaviour see Custers & Aarts, 2010).

### Self-concordant goals

Self-concordance is important in goal setting because goals that are self-concordant and in alignment with the coachee's core personal values or developing interests are more likely to be engaging and elicit greater effort. Self-concordance theory (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998) is a useful framework from which to understand and work with the reasons and motivations associated with goal selection and goal strivings.

Self-concordance refers to the degree to which a goal is aligned with an individual's intrinsic interests, motivations and values. Derived from self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1980) this can be a simple and powerful framework for understanding the link between values and goals. The self-

concordance model emphasises the extent to which individual perceives their goals as being determined by their authentic self, rather than compelled by external forces.

The self-concordance approach delineates the perceived locus of causality as varying on a continuum from controlled (external) factors to internal (autonomous) facets. A key point here is that it is the individual's *perception* of the locus of causality that is the key in determining the extent to which the goals are deemed to be self-integrated and where they sit on the external-internal continuum. To maximise the probability of genuinely engaged and motivated action, and to increase the chances of goal satisfaction upon goal attainment, it is important that coachee's goals are as self-congruent as possible, and coaches may need to play quite an active role in helping their coaches align goals in order to make them personal and congruent. There are at least four factors from this perspective which may influence successful goal alignment (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999).

First, the coachee needs to be able to identify the enduring and authentic from transitory or superficial whims or desires. Secondly, the coachee needs the personal insight and self-awareness to be able to distinguish between goals that represent their own interests and goals that represent the interests of others (Sheldon, 2002). Given that there are significant individual variations in levels of self-awareness (Church, 1997), some coachees may find this quite challenging. Thirdly, the goal content needs to be expressed in a way that aligns the goals with the coachee's internal needs and values. Fourthly, the coach needs to have the ability to recognise when a goal is not self-concordant, and then be able to re-language and reframe the goal so that it does align with the coachee's needs and values.

### **Goal hierarchies: Linking values, goals and actions steps**

The relationships between values, goals and action steps are generally not well under-

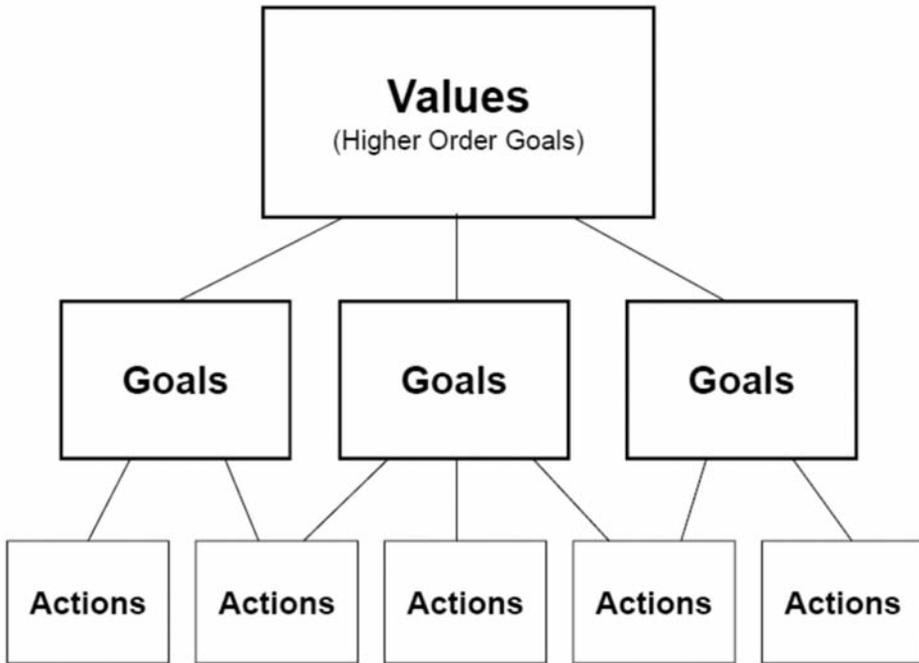
stood in coaching, yet these are central to coaching practice. Goal hierarchy frameworks are one way of making explicit the links between values, goals and specific action steps, and are also a useful way of operationalising the notion of goal self-concordance (see Figure 2).

Goals can be considered as being ordered hierarchically with concrete specific goals being subsumed under *higher order* and broader, more abstract goals (Chulef, Read & Walsh, 2001) in a fashion similar to the 'Big Five' personality traits (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Hence, higher order abstract goals such as 'to be a great business leader' can be understood as being situated vertically higher than the *lower order* and more specific goal 'to increase business profits by 25 per cent in the next quarter' and there is some empirical support for this notion (Chulef et al., 2001; Oishi et al., 1998).

Higher order goals from this perspective equate to values. A valuable model for using goal theory in coaching involves thinking of values as *higher order abstract* goals that are superordinate to lower order, more specific goals, which in turn are superordinate to specific action steps. Indeed, visualising values, goals and actions as being part of a hierarchy in this way provides coaches with an extremely useful case conceptualisation framework for coaching practice, teaching and supervision, and also makes the notion of values more tangible to many coaching clients.

In using this model in coaching practice, it is important to try to ensure both vertical and horizontal congruency. That is, to ensure that goals are aligned with the client's higher order values, and that any actions designed to operationalise the goals are themselves similarly aligned (vertical alignment). It is also important that to try to ensure horizontal alignment so that goals compliment, support and energise each other rather than being, as previously mentioned, being *competing or conflicting* goals resulting in the pursuit of one goal interfering with the pursuit of another.

Figure 2: The Goal hierarchy framework.



Of course, such alignment may not always be possible. Nevertheless, simply drawing the coachee's attention to the existence of any competing or conflicting goals, and highlighting any disconnect between goals and values can provide the coachee with important insights and alternative perspectives which may in turn facilitate more useful ways of facilitating change.

In addition, in terms of teaching coaching and coaching psychology, this model can be used as a practical template to help student coaches develop more sophisticated understandings of the goal alignment process.

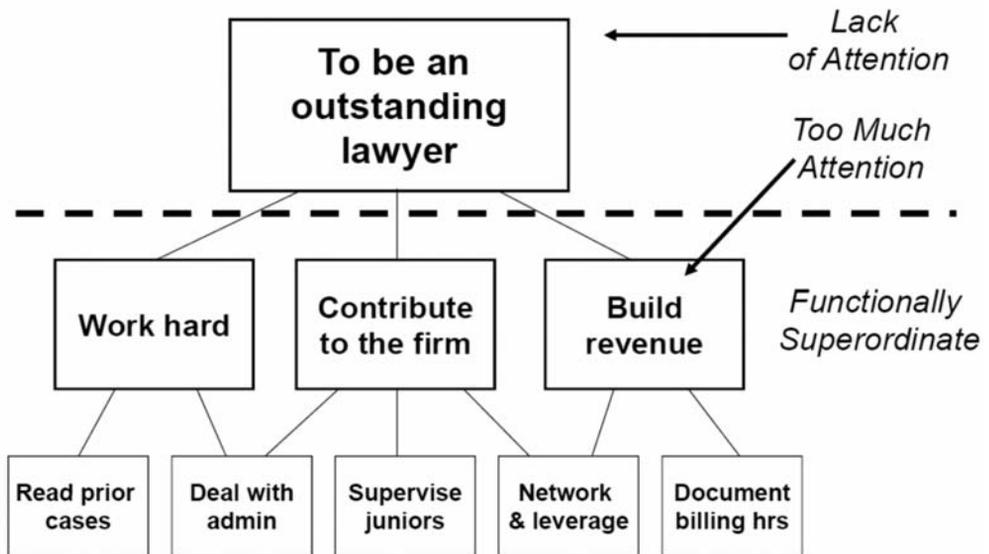
### Goal neglect

The hierarchical model is also very useful to coaches as it can be used to illustrate the effect of goal neglect. The notion of goal neglect is not well-known in the coaching literature, but has very useful implications for coaching practice.

The term *goal neglect* refers to the disregard of a goal or a task requirement despite the fact that it has been understood or is recognised as being important (Duncan et al., 1996). In essence goal neglect occurs when we fail to pay attention to a specific goal of importance, but instead focus our attention on some other goal or task, resulting in a mismatch between the actions required to attain the original goal, and the actions that are actually performed.

Human beings are essentially goal-directed organisms. All our behaviour (behaviour here is broadly defined to include thoughts, feelings and physical actions) is shaped and given direction, purpose and meaning by the goals that we hold, and of course much of our behaviour is shaped and directed by goals and values which are outside of our immediate conscious awareness. In relation to the goal hierarchy model, it is the higher order (or superordinate) values that give direction,

Figure 3: The Goal hierarchy framework illustrating the outcomes of goal neglect.



meaning and purpose to the lower order goals and actions.

When self-regulation at upper levels of a goal hierarchy has been suspended (for example, by not enough attention being paid to those values), the goals at a lower level become functionally superordinate in guiding overt behaviour and actions (Carver & Scheier, 1998). That is to say that the guidance of the human system defaults (regresses) to lower levels (see Figure 3).

This seemingly technical psychological point has important implications for coaching practice. This is because, typically, lower order goals in the hierarchy are not in themselves relatively meaningful in comparison to the higher order values. In fact in many cases the lower order goals and actions may not be pleasant activities at all. They are often on made palatable by the notion that reaching those lower order goals activates the higher order value.

When we fail to consistently pay attention to the higher order values in the goal hierarchy system, and overly focus on attaining lower order goals, the lower order goals become the superordinate or dominant

values in the cognitive system, and these lower order goals are often inherently dissatisfying in themselves.

In the example above, the higher order value is 'to be an outstanding lawyer', and many individuals may enter the law profession with the intention of becoming an outstanding lawyer and ensuring that their clients receive justice. In order to become an outstanding lawyer they would need to work hard, make explicit contributions to their firm or practice and build a revenue stream. The attainment of these mid-level goals are in turn made possible by the enactment of lower order goals and actions such as dealing with administration, documenting billing hours and the like. However, frequently individuals place their attention on the lower order goals (e.g. revenue building or documenting billing hours) over time neglecting their higher order values, and this can easily result in goal dissatisfaction and disengagement.

The hierarchical framework can give coaches and their coachees very useful insights into to the psychological mechanics underlying goal dissatisfaction, and can be

used to develop practical tools and techniques to help clients in the coaching processes. For example, by helping clients purposefully re-focus their attention on their higher order values we help them reconnect with the meaning inherent in their higher order values, redefining their goals if needed, with the result that they may well feel revitalised and re-engaged in the enactment of purposeful positive change.

### **Putting all this together: An integrated model for teaching and coaching practice**

As can be seen from this brief overview goal theory has much to offer coaching practice. The question is, how can we organise this information in a way that makes this useful in coaching practice? It may be that goal theory has not been widely taught in coaching programmes because there is a vast amount of material on goal and the goal attainment process, and making explicit links between these bodies of knowledge and then relating this material to coaching practice is not easy.

One way of integrating this diverse body of knowledge is to develop a visual representation or model of the various factors related to goal-focused coaching, and such a model is presented in Figure 4. This model may be useful for teaching coaching and the psychology of coaching because it attempts to capture the key aspects involved in the goal-focused approach to coaching and highlights some of the factors that a coach may consider during the coaching engagement.

A word of caution: as with all models this is only a broad representation of some of the possible ways that these factors relate in the coaching process. This model represents my own personal experience and understanding, and I would encourage readers to explore the limitations of this model by reference to their own understanding and coaching experience, and then adapt and extend this model in order to create their own frameworks. Indeed the development of

such personalised models can be useful teaching aids.

Examining this model, it can be seen that the coaching process is driven by needs (represented on the left hand side of the model). Both individual and contextual/organisational factors play important roles in determining the perceived need for coaching, which gives rise to the individual's intentions to participate in the goal selection process. Individual factors at play here include perceived deficits and opportunities, psychological needs, personality characteristics and available resources (or lack thereof). Contextual or organisational factors include system complexity, the social and psychological contracts, rewards and punishments and available resources (or lack thereof).

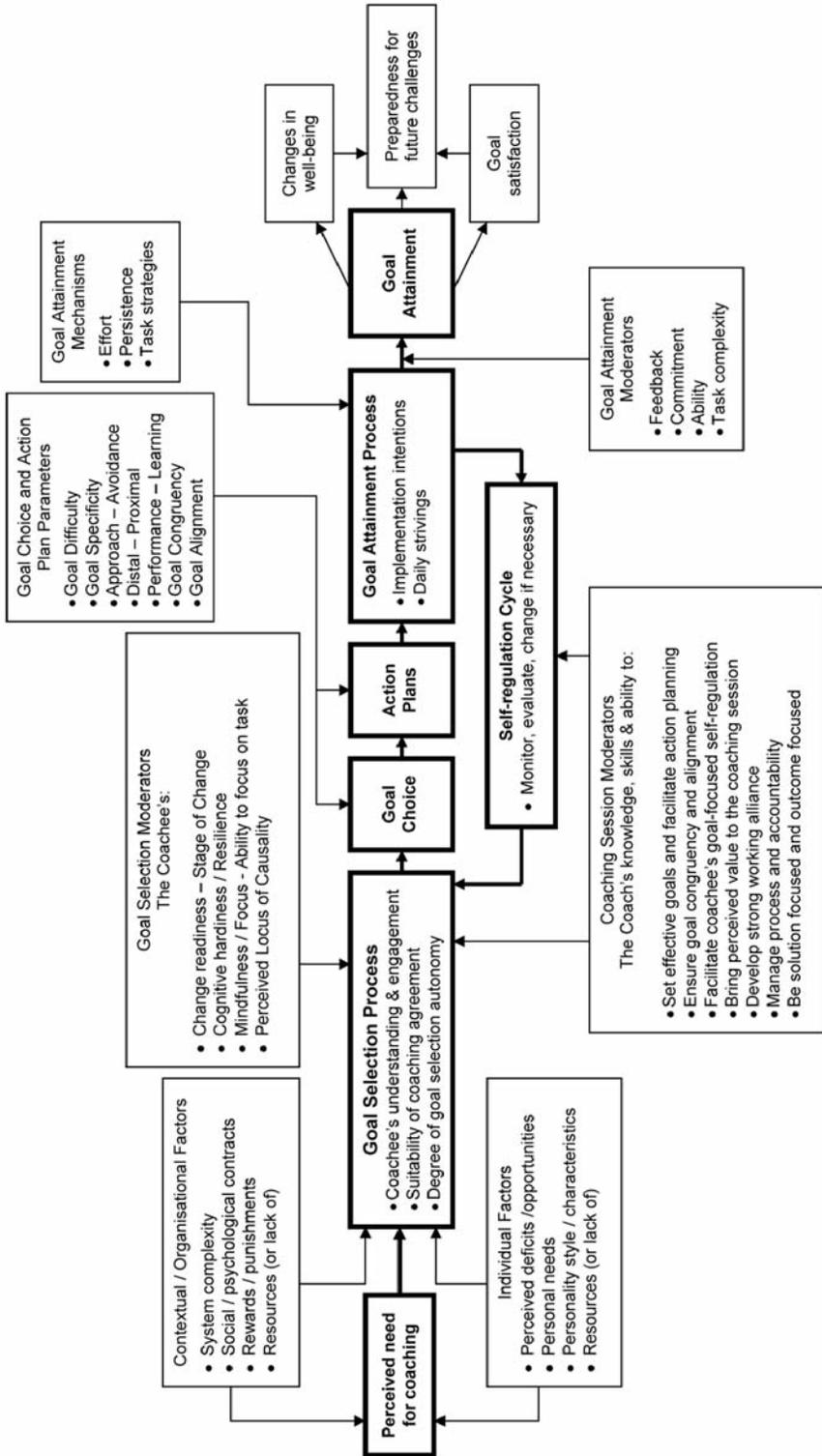
The goal selection process is often not straightforward. Even where coaching has been mandated by an organisation with specific outcomes in mind, the goal setting process can be convoluted and complex. The rush to seize and set a specific goal too early in the coaching process is a key derailer – a common trap for the novice. Certainly key issues and broad initial goals should be discussed quite early in the coaching process in order to give the conversation direction and purpose, but the coach should also be paying attention to a number of factors during the goal selection process. These include the coachee's understanding of, and engagement with, the coaching process.

Some coachees arrive for their first coaching session with little idea of the nature of coaching. The suitability and clarity of the coaching agreement (be that formal or informal) will play an important role in engaging the coachee in the goal selection process, as will the degree of autonomy the coachee has in goal selection.

### **Goal selection moderators: The coachee's characteristics**

There are a number of moderator variables that influence the strength of a relationship between coaching goals and the eventual outcomes of coaching. These include the

Figure 4: Integrative model of coach-facilitated goal attainment.



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coachee's ability to focus on the tasks at hand, their ability to adapt in the face of adversity, and the perceived purpose of the goal and the extent to which they feel that they have agency and autonomy in the goal selection process.

### **Readiness to change**

The coachee's readiness to change is another factor that will impact on the goal selection process. Coaches need to consider if the coachee is in the pre-contemplation, preparation or action stage of change (for a useful reference on applying the Transtheoretical Model of Change to a wide range of goals, see Prochaska, Norcross & DiClemente, 1994). The Transtheoretical Model of Change posits that change involves transition through a series of identifiable, although somewhat overlapping stages. Five of these stages have direct relevance for goal setting in coaching. These stages are:

1. *Pre-contemplation*: No intention to change in the foreseeable future.
2. *Contemplation*: Considering making changes, but have not yet made any changes.
3. *Preparation*: Increased commitment to change, intend to make changes in the near future and often have started to make small changes.
4. *Action*: Engaging in the new behaviours, but have made such changes for only a short period of time (usually less than six months).
5. *Maintenance*: Consistently engaging in the new behaviour over a period of time (usually six months).

### **Stage-specific coaching strategies**

For individuals in the *Pre-contemplation* stage the general principle is to raise awareness, increasing the amount of information available to the coachee so that they can move forward into action. There are many ways of raising awareness including multi-rater feedback sales, qualitative feedback, sales or performance data, or other relevant information.

The key characteristic of the *Contemplation* stage is ambivalence; the conjoint holding of two or more conflicting desires, emotions, beliefs or opinions. The general principle for individuals in the *Contemplation* stage is to help the coachee explore their ambivalence, rather than pushing them into setting a specific goal before they are ready. Setting specific or stretching goals too soon in this stage often results in the coachee disengaging from the goal selection process.

In the *Preparation* stage the coachee is getting ready to make change. Here the aim is to build commitment to change. In terms of goals, the coach should be helping the coachee focus on developing a clear vision of the future (abstract goals) and using goals that involve small, easily attainable but consistent action steps. Progress throughout this stage should be monitored closely and new desired behaviours positively reinforced by acknowledging and celebrating the attainment of small sub-goals. Clearly, there is a considerable art to the effective use of goals in coaching.

In the *Action* and *Maintenance* stages the key is to build on past successes and maximise self-directed change, working on using more stretching goals and developing strategies to sustain the change overtime.

### **Coaching session moderators:**

#### **The coach's skill set**

There are a number of other factors related to the coaching session itself that impact on the goal selection process and act as moderator variables. This include the coach's ability to set effective goals and facilitate action planning, and the coach's ability to maximise goal congruency and goal alignment whilst also facilitating the coachee's goal-focused self-regulation.

The success of the above is also dependant on the coach's ability to bring perceived value to the coaching session and develop a strong working alliance with the coachee (Gray, 2007). All the theoretical knowledge in the world about goal theory is of no importance, unless the coach can put this

theory into practice, managing the goal striving process, whilst holding the coachee accountable and being solution focused and outcome focused.

### **Goal choice and action planning**

Goal choice and action planning are outcomes of the goal selection process. It is important to note that although the model represents these as linear processes, in reality these are iterative, with an amount of back and forth movement between stages. The goal choice and action planning parameters include goal difficulty and goal specificity, whether the goals are approach or avoidance goals, time framing (distal or proximal) or a performance or learning orientation.

Goal choice is a necessary, but not sufficient part of the coaching process – action plans must be developed and enacted. Action planning is the process of developing a systemic means of attaining goals and is particularly important for individuals who have low self-regulatory skills (Kirschenbaum, Humphrey & Malett, 1981). The coach's role here is to develop the coachee's ability to create a realistic and workable plan of action and to help them define task strategies that will facilitate the goal striving process, whilst promoting persistence in the face of adversity – in this way clients can enhance their self-regulation abilities and build resilience (Grant et al., 2009)

One key outcome of successful action planning is the coachee's transition from a *deliberative* mindset to an *implementational* mindset (Gollwitzer, 1996; Heckhausen & Gollwitzer, 1987). The deliberative mindset is characterised by a weighing of the pros and cons of action and examination of competing goals or courses of action (Carver & Scheier, 1998). The implementational mindset is engaged once the decision to act has been made. This mindset has a determined, focused quality, and is biased in favour of thinking about success rather than failure – factors that are typically associated with higher levels of self-efficacy, self-regulation and goal attainment (Bandura, 1982).

### **The self-regulation cycle, feedback and goal satisfaction**

The monitoring and evaluation of actions and the generation of feedback as the coachee moves through the self-regulation cycle is a vital part of the coaching process. However, self-reflection does not come naturally to many people (Jordan & Troth, 2002), and so the coach may need to find ways to develop action plans that focus on observable, easily monitored behaviours.

What is monitored will, of course, vary according to the coachee's goals and context. Some behaviours will be easier to monitor than others. Exercise or physical activity-based actions can be relatively straightforward to monitor. Intrapersonal issues, interpersonal skills or communication patterns in the workplace may be more difficult to monitor, and the coach and coachee may have to be quite creative in devising means of monitoring and evaluating these.

Care should be taken to set the kinds of goals that will generate useful feedback, because the right feedback is vital in providing information about how (or if) subsequent goals and associated actions should be modified, and this process, if done well, will eventuate in successful goal attainment (Locke & Latham, 2002). Goals that have been aligned with the coachee's intrinsic interests or personal values are more likely to be personally satisfying when achieved, and the positive emotions associated with such goal satisfaction may well play an important part in priming the coachee for engagement in future challenges (Sheldon, 2002).

### **So what? Does goal theory matter in practice?**

Although it is clear from the above discussion that goal theory can inform what happens within coaching sessions and also has great relevance for the broader coaching process, the question arises: does goal theory really matter in actual practice? Is the coach's ability to be goal-focused related to coaching outcomes? This is a key question

for the further development of evidence-based coaching practice.

A significant body of research within the psychotherapeutic literature holds that the most important factors in determining therapeutic outcomes are the so-called 'common factors' – the ability of the therapist to develop a working alliance with the client that embodies trust, warmth and respect for the client's autonomy (Lampropoulos, 2000). Not surprisingly it is often assumed in the coaching literature that this is also the case for coaching (McKenna & Davis, 2009a). However, coaching is not therapy. The aims and process of coaching and therapy are different.

To date there have been few studies that have sought to explore the importance of goals in the coaching relationship, so I was interested to see which aspect of the coaching relationship was more positively related to coaching outcomes – a goal-focused approach to coaching, or the so-called 'common-factors' associated with the person-centred approach (Grant, 2012). To explore this issue I designed a within-subjects (pre-post) coaching study, in which 49 mature age coachees (males=12; females=37; mean age 37.5 years) set personal goals and completed a 10- to 12-week, five-session, solution-focused cognitive-behavioural personal coaching programme using the GROW model\* (Whitmore, 1992).

Participants were asked to identify their desired outcome for the coaching relationship (i.e. their goal) and then rated the extent to which they had achieved this outcome on a scale from 0 per cent (no attainment) to 100 per cent (complete attainment). Psychological health was also assessed using the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) and an 18-item version of Ryff's

Psychological Well-being Scales (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). In addition, self-insight was assessed using the Insight subscale of the Self-reflection and Insight Scale (SRIS; Grant, Franklin & Langford, 2002).

In order to see which aspect of the coaching relationship was the better predictor of coaching success, two key measures of the coaching relationship were used. The goal-focused aspect of the coaching relationship was measured using an adaptation of the Goal-focused Coaching Skills Questionnaire (GCSQ; Grant & Cavanagh, 2007). Items on this scale include: 'The coach was very good at helping me develop clear, simple and achievable action plans'; 'We discussed any failures on my part to complete agreed actions steps'; 'The goals we set during coaching were very important to me'; 'My coach asked me about progress towards my goals'; 'The goals we set were stretching but attainable'.

The 'common factors' aspect was assessed using an adaptation of Deci and Ryan's (2005) Perceived Autonomy Support Scale (PASS). Items on this scale included: 'My coach listened to how I would like to do things'; 'I feel that my coach cares about me as a person'; 'My coach encouraged me to ask questions'; 'I feel that my coach accepts me'; 'I felt understood by my coach'; 'I feel a lot of trust in my coach'.

The coaching programme appeared to be effective and successful in helping the clients reach their desired outcomes for the coaching relationship: there was a significant increase in goal attainment following the coaching programme ( $t_{1,48}$  (11.43);  $p < .001$ ), as well as insight ( $t_{1,48}$  (2.61);  $p < .05$ ), and significant decreases in anxiety ( $t_{1,48}$  (2.89);  $p < .01$ ) and stress ( $t_{1,48}$  (2.13);  $p < .05$ ). No changes in levels of depression or psychological well-being were observed.

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\* The GROW model is a commonly-used way of structuring the coaching conversation by setting a goal for the coaching session, then discussing the reality of the situation, exploring options and finally wrapping up the session by delineating some action steps. Although this may appear to be a simplistic linear process, in fact the GROW model can be used in a sophisticated and iterative fashion, with the conversation cycling back and forth between steps. For an extended discussion on the use of the GROW model see Grant (2011).

The main area of interest was the relationship between coaching success and the various aspects of the coaching styles used by the coaches. There was a significant correlation between coaching success as defined by the extent to which the client had achieved their desired outcome (i.e. goal attainment) and the GCSQ ( $r=.43$ ;  $p<.01$ ), and there was also a significant correlation between coaching success (as defined by the extent to which the client had achieved their desired outcome) and the PASS ( $r=.29$ ;  $p<.05$ ). Not surprisingly there was also a significant correlation between the GCSQ and the PASS ( $r=.61$ ;  $p<.001$ ). This suggests that both a goal-focused coaching style and a 'common factors' person-centred coaching style contribute to coaching success.

However, and this is a key point, the correlation between coaching success (goal attainment) and the goal-focused coaching style measured by the GCSQ remained significant even when statistically controlling for a 'common factors' person-centred coaching style as measured by the PASS ( $r=.31$ ;  $p<.05$ ). It should also be noted that, when controlling for the goal-focused coaching style as measured by the GCSQ, the relationship between the PASS and coaching success (goal attainment) was not significant ( $r=.03$ ;  $p=.81$ ).

These findings strongly suggest that the use of goals in coaching is indeed of practical importance in that the use of a goal-focused coaching style is more effective than a 'common factors' person-centred coaching style in the coaching context. This is not to say that a person-centred relationship is not important. Rather, this reminds us that the coaching relationship differs from the counselling or therapeutic relationship, and that coaches need to be mindful of the fact that they are employed by their clients to help make purposeful and positive change in their personal and professional lives.

## **Conclusion**

Coaches may use metaphors such as helping clients chart a course, navigate the waters of life or re-author their lived narratives, and such metaphors may well be powerful vehicles for facilitating change. Some coaches may prefer to talk about their role in terms of helping clients explore their values, clarify their intentions, or working to help them to achieve their personal aspirations, rather than using the perceived jargon of goal theory. Clearly coaches should feel entirely free to express themselves and describe their work as they choose. However, at its core coaching is necessarily a goal-directed activity, regardless of linguistic gymnastics or variations in meaning-making perspectives, and goal theory can indeed provide a useful lens through which to understand coaching.

The integrative goal-focused model presented here is a multifaceted evidence-based methodology for helping individuals and organisations create and sustain purposeful positive change. Because the coaching conversation is inherently iterative, and frequently unpredictable and non-linear, the key issue for coaches is one of informed flexibility in using goal theory: Goal use in coaching is far more than the simplistic SMART acronym implies.

By understanding the different types of goals and their relationship to the process of change, and through facilitating the goal alignment and goal-pursuit processes, skilful professional coaches can work more efficiently with their clients, helping them to achieve insight and behavioural change that enhances their workplace performance, their professional working lives and, most importantly, their personal well-being and sense of self. After all, that is surely the overarching goal of the coaching enterprise itself.

## Acknowledgements

This article draws on and extends presentations given by the author at the 2012 International Congress of Coaching Psychology held at Sydney, Australia in May 2012, and a chapter by the author in Clutterbuck, D., Megginson, D. & David, S. (Eds.) (2012), *Beyond Goals: Effective Strategies for Coaching and Mentoring*. Gower Publishing, London

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