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DESIREable Coaching Objectives are More Motivating

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Introduction

In executive coaching, clear coaching goals are powerful things. They give the coaching work a purpose. They help coach and client to stay on track and assess progress. They help the sponsoring organisation to determine whether its coaching investment has paid off. However, developing clear goals that help the client to stay motivated as well as focussed is not always easy.

Some coaching goals are better than others. By "better", I mean "more likely to be achieved". One well-known goal-setting tool is SMART – a mnemonic that captures the qualities of a clear objective. There are a number of versions of SMART. The one I use is:

Specific make the objective crystal clear

Measured identify quantitative and/or qualitative measures that will demonstrate when the objective has been achieved

Agreed check that the client really wants to pursue this objective

Realistic make the objective achievable

Time-bound have a clear deadline or a series of deadlines for the objective

SMART is a great tool for sharpening up and clarifying objectives. However, experience working with coaching clients shows that a goal can be SMART without being motivating. If an objective is not motivating, it is less likely to be achieved, simply because the client will not give it the attention and effort it needs. A client who is clear about what he/she needs to achieve is not necessarily a client who is ready to make the effort to achieve it.

To help clients to develop objectives that are motivating as well as clear, I have read a lot of goal-setting literature and research. From this I have identified a number of factors that successful goals have in common. I have tested these factors with my clients, and, two years ago, I brought them together in a new mnemonic – DESIRE. None of the factors that make up DESIRE is new. What *is* new is my coining of the mnemonic DESIRE itself as a tool for setting motivating objectives. DESIRE stands for:

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D   Direction

Research demonstrates that people will work towards an objective more tenaciously if they are working for something they positively want, rather than seeking to avoid something that they do not want. Goals that are framed positively direct us towards what to do rather than highlighting what not to do. Negative goals direct our attention to the shortcomings we wish to avoid or eliminate. Put simply, it is more motivating to head in the positive direction of "I will succeed", rather than to focus on the negative goal of "I want to avoid failing". Similarly, the goal "I want to be credible in board meetings", works better as a motivator than "I must stop being tongue-tied in board meetings". Working towards a positive outcome motivates us more than simply trying to avoid a negative one.

E   Effort

For an objective to be motivating, the client has to believe that the effort/payback equation will balance out favourably. The reward the client will derive from achieving the objective has to justify the effort it will take to achieve it. There is no point in the client agreeing to an objective that he/she secretly believes is going to be more effort than it is worth. Objectives like that never get off the ground.

S   Stretch

Most people associate stretch goals with Jack Welch at General Electric. GE's philosophy was that people would be energised to perform better if they were set goals that went significantly beyond their current capability. It is true that goal-setting research demonstrates that setting more difficult goals leads to higher performance. However, this only works if the individual believes that he/she is capable of meeting the stretch objective. Stretch goals that demand the impossible are demotivating for many and so are counterproductive. So, for a goal to be motivating, it should represent a stretch for the client… but one that he/she believes is actually achievable.

I   Influence

The objective must be something that the client can make happen. For example, "Be promoted to Director" is not wholly within a client's sphere of influence – that promotion decision will be taken by someone else and there may be stronger candidates being considered at the same time as our client. More usefully, the client could develop objectives around finding a sponsor and winning his/her support; developing a business case that meets the organisation's needs; or achieving a personal profile with decision makers that will showcase the client's recent successes. All of these are within the client's sphere of influence. An objective that the client can influence is far more motivating than one that relies entirely on the actions of others.

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R   Resources

It is often worth identifying the resources the client needs to achieve this objective and any resource gaps that he/she faces. Resources can be internal such as skills, knowledge and confidence. They might be external such as staff, finance, time, networks and contacts, a demonstrable track record, or a useful sponsor. As well as identifying any shortfalls in resource it is important for the client to identify the resources and strengths he/she already possesses that will help him/her achieve the objective.

E   End point

Clients are motivated by having a clear picture of exactly what it will be like when the objective is achieved. When clients know what "success" will look and feel like they are more motivated to work towards that vision of the future. This is like the "S" in "SMART" meaning "specific", and that "M" for "measurable". Good objectives are clearly articulated and unambiguous – it's hard to be motivated by an ill-understood objective. Qualitative descriptions of a successful outcome are as useful here as quantitative measures. The more clearly the client can imagine what his/her world will be like when the objective has been met, the more chance there is that he/she will make the effort to meet it.

Using DESIRE pragmatically – tips

I know from my work training other coaches that this list of unfamiliar factors can look lengthy, so there are several things to say about using DESIRE in practice.

Firstly, it takes time to craft a really good objective. It can be hard to achieve a 100% DESIREable objective in just one conversation with a client, particularly if that objective centres on a qualitative development goal.

Secondly, there is no need for the coach to cover every DESIREable factor every time that he/she sets a goal with a client. Some parts of DESIRE will be more relevant than others. Not all the factors are useful in every case. I find the ones that I use most frequently are:

- Direction
- Effort
- Influence
- End point

If the client develops sensible descriptions under each of these headings, he/she will probably have a clear objective that he/she wants to achieve and is able to influence. That will be an objective that has a solid chance of being delivered.

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Finally, there is no one right order in which to discuss the DESIRE factors. DESIRE is a superb reminder of the issues to explore with a client when setting coaching goals, but I never use it as a structure to determine the order in which we should discuss them. DESIRE is a mnemonic – not a flow chart nor a process to follow. To illustrate this, the box below shows some of the DESIRE questions I used recently in a coaching conversation in roughly the order in which I used them. The focus was that familiar development goal of "having more impact in meetings".

End point

- If you were having the kind of impact in meetings that you want, what would be happening?
- How would you know that you were having an impact?
- How would people be responding to you?
- If you knew you were having an impact, how would you feel in those meetings?

Direction

- Can you turn that around? Instead of saying you want to stop being so laid back, can you tell me how you would like be?

Influence

- Am I right in thinking that this is something you can do without asking anyone else's permission or getting anyone else's support?

Effort

- How appealing does this change look to you?
- What's the real benefit to you of making this change?
- Where does that leave you on the "is this worth it, or not?" equation?

In short, SMART is a great tool for sharpening objectives and making them clear. DESIRE is a complementary tool that helps the client to set objectives that describe worthwhile and positive outcomes – DESIREable outcomes. A client who is both clear and motivated about an objective is much more likely to pursue it tenaciously and to get results. When that happens, the coaching goal is really doing its job of moving the client forward.