Essay 9: Thoughts on goal setting

I don't like goals. If you have had good experiences with goals, then you should ignore me. I could be wrong, but I would like you to think about goals. If you are going to live with goals, try to do them right.

You could accuse me of not liking goals because they are more emotional than cerebral, and I, of course, am pretending to be more cerebral than emotional for these essays. Nevertheless, I have had bad experiences with goals. The president goes to a workshop and is told that every college should set a goal. The president sets an amazing goal. The college rallies around the goal. The focus is on the goal. Planning aims at the goal. Proposals are written for the goal. Grants are received for the goal. T-shirts are printed for the goal. But, five years later, not only has the goal not been met, there has also been no progress. What happened? Why doesn't Rah! Rah! Rah! work?

There is a logic to goals in sports. "Let's go out there and beat those guys, Rah! Rah! Rah!" Adrenalin runs high, performance improves. This "us vs. them" hypnosis blinds you to how awful a couple of your Neanderthal teammates are, and you work as a team for once. While that adrenalin and those weeks of extra pushups will help you in football, do they help you in higher education? Do those long hours, banners, and t-shirts really help?

If the banners and t-shirts help you get out of a procedural rut and try something new, then they are probably a good thing. But have they given you a *structure* to do something new? Suppose you have a committee of eight people with a half million-dollar grant aimed at helping one hundred students. Does that change how the college does things enough to help it meet a college-wide goal?

Goal setting outside of a structural change process does nothing. It's like a football team depending on its cheerleaders instead of practicing new plays to win games.

You will find goals imbedded in Essay 4 on Levels of Knowledge. They are part of principles, where the team notes what it wants to accomplish, and the behaviors they wish to exhibit as they move in that direction. That part of the process is also used to develop protections for all stakeholders, such that the project is not blocked by stakeholders whose rights might be diminished without compensation.

As part of the levels of knowledge project development scheme, goals are not emotionally driven targets, but a direction of change, subject to resource constraints, and assessment. They are part of a system of systemic change.

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Goals that are part of principles are more likely to be met because outcomes are stated, assessments have been designed, resources have been deemed adequate, proper behavior has been defined, and stakeholders have been reassured. Stakeholders will have bought into the project. In the end, goals are measurable, doable, have been communally developed, have an end date, and can be ethically achieved.

A goal-centered project, as opposed to a process-centered project, may suffer from the project-end-let-down syndrome. What happens if you don't make the goal? What happens if you do make it? What happens if in hindsight the goal appears to have been too hard? What happens if the goal has been too easy? The ending of a goal-centered project can push an organization into malaise. After everyone has worked long hours and lived on adrenaline, even if the goal is met, little energy is left to maintain, much less build, momentum.

With a process-centered project, assessment of the process and the audit of beliefs, values, and principles pushes the team toward reflection. No process is perfect. There are always ways to improve, even though the project may have had successful, measurable outcomes.

At one college, I told the director of admissions that her enrollment target was too low to allow a balanced budget. We needed 100 more students. "No problem, she said. "For 100 more students, I will need 125 more applications. I will need 500 hours more staff time to process the applications. Let see, that's Y dollars. To get 125 more applications, I will need to generate 2,500 inquiries. At Z dollars to generate one inquiry, that's W dollars. Thus, I will need Y + W dollars more in my budget, and I will get you 100 more students." I did a little algebra. "Okay," I said. "To balance the budget and pay for the extra money you need, I now need 110 students and you need 110% of Y + W." We had a deal. I didn't ask her to work harder. She didn't volunteer to get me my extra students by working harder. She said, "I need more money to do that, and here's how much." Most goals in higher education cannot be met by working harder. They are met by allocating the proper resources and effective, sometime new, systems.

Nevertheless, I must not take this rational approach too far. Colleges and universities are too complex to allow easy solutions. The challenge of allocating resources to multiple projects where stakeholders have varying value functions is great. There is no way to optimize multiple projects over multiple value functions. A good retention project with lifetime earnings benefits for those who are retained cannot easily be compared to a new online degree program of benefit to

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underserved new students. Different people would make the value trade-off between benefit to current students vs. benefit to new students differently. Where should the funds be invested? That's why colleges have presidents. Even when it is as rational as one system competing with another interlocked system, limited resources means that the president must make a choice. After all the figures, dollars, benefits, outcomes, and emotions are on the table, the president must make a "gut" choice. While Nathan has had his comeuppance with this dashing of rationality, he now retorts, sniffing, "Well, if the process has been good, and the systems are well-managed, the president's 'gut' will be well-informed."

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