



**Missing the Bigger Opportunity?
Why Goal Setting is Not all it's
Cracked up to Be**

Are You Missing a Bigger Opportunity? Why Goal Setting Isn't Always All It's Cracked Up to Be

“Goals are only as good as the perspective from which they're imagined. The real magic happens when you set an ambitious direction and remain open to the unimaginable opportunities that unfold along the way.”

–Piers Fallowfield-Cooper

Goal setting: the bedrock of ambition, the cornerstone of success, the sacred cow of personal and professional development. It's practically heresy to question it. From corporate boardrooms to self-help seminars, the mantra is the same—set detailed, carefully planned, ambitious goals and the world is yours.

But what if the pursuit of goals is part of the problem? What if, by focusing so intensely on achieving pre-determined specific outcomes, we lose sight of the very things that could make life and leadership fulfilling?

Years ago, I set 20 goals for the year. I was determined, organized, and, dare I say, disciplined. By year-end, I had achieved 18 of them. Objectively, a resounding success. Subjectively? Rather unfulfilling. The two unachieved goals nagged at me, and the 18 accomplishments felt strangely hollow. Something fundamental was missing.

Why? Because goals, as I later realized, are inherently limited by our current state of reference. **They reflect what we can imagine, rather than what might be possible.** And in the single-minded pursuit of these self-imposed targets, we risk missing out on opportunities we couldn't foresee—those 'unimaginable' doors that open only when we lift our eyes from the list and engage with the world around us.

This lesson applies to leadership too—achieving the 'team objectives' doesn't in itself always equate to lasting impact or fulfilment. Leaders must think beyond the checklist to inspire meaningful progress.

“Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change.”

–Stephen Hawking

In leadership, goal-setting is often positioned as the cornerstone of strategy execution, a must-have for effective teams and organisations. But what if this revered practice is limiting rather than empowering?

The Double-Edged Sword of Goals

Goals provide focus and accountability. They create a gap between where you are and where you want to be, igniting motivation to close it. But the downsides are often overlooked:

- **Tunnel Vision:** A CEO obsessed with quarterly profit targets may overlook opportunities to innovate or build long-term resilience.
- **Ethical Compromises:** Ford's Pinto scandal prioritized sales goals over safety, leading to disastrous consequences.

- **Reduced Intrinsic Motivation:** Teams incentivized solely by targets lose passion for serving clients.
- **Stress and Burnout:** Unmet goals can cause anxiety and dissatisfaction.
- **Short-Term Thinking:** Rapid user acquisition, for example, at the expense of long-term value.

Goals appear seductive, promising control. But when goal-pursuit becomes an end in itself, the risks often outweigh the rewards.

The lure and lunacy of goal setting

Of course, we all “know” that writing down your goals will make you more money, get you promoted faster, and make you irresistible in bed. It must be true, it’s on the internet:

In 1953 a team of researchers interviewed Yale’s graduating seniors, asking them whether they had written down the specific goals that they wanted to achieve in life.

Twenty years later the researchers tracked down the same cohort and found that the 3% of people who had specific goals all those years before had accumulated more personal wealth than the other 97% of their classmates combined.²

This is fake news. There is no evidence. Harvard, Yale and the Ford Foundation have all been attributed as the researchers. Many studies on the power of goal setting are based on this myth. Books abound from famous authors such as Tony Robbins, Zig Ziglar, and Brian Tracy quoting these “facts”. Quite probably 97% of these books were written by people who wrote down their goals.

Excerpt from my book, *Are You Still The Future?*

“Life is what happens when you are busy making other plans.”

–Allen Saunders, made famous by John Lennon

But if rigid goal-setting creates these risks and doesn’t truly deliver, how do we shift our approach? The answer lies in stepping back, reassessing, and creating the room for new opportunities to emerge—opportunities that rigid goals might have obscured.

The Space for Emergence: What Are You Willing to Give Up?

Most people (and indeed organisations) miss one foundational step in the process: you need to make space for the new; and to make space for the new we must be willing to release the old. Leadership and personal growth require not just embracing the unknown but letting go of what no longer serves us. Imagine your goals as a tightly packed suitcase—overflowing with items you thought you needed but never use. To fit something truly valuable, you must remove something.

***“You must give up the life you planned
in order to have the life that is waiting for you.”***

–Joseph Campbell

Ask yourself: What am I willing to give up to make room for what truly matters?

Observe and act upon the signals in the system

There's finite time, finite energy, finite resources, a finite number of people you can spend time with. There's a finite number of projects you can do, so what are you going to do with the finite days you have left? Are you going to do everything averagely? Are you going to get rid of some things so you can do others really well?

The challenge is deciding. When you know how to decide on which things to focus, it all seems rather easy. Know that there are signs to observe, there are signals in the system that can guide you – if you know where to look.

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Once we've freed ourselves from the constraints of rigid goals and made some space, we need a new approach—one that provides direction without stifling adaptability. This is where The Directional Approach comes in.

A New Perspective: *The Directional Approach*

So, what's the alternative? Instead of rigid, checklist-style goal setting, we need a shift in perspective—what I call **The Directional Approach**.

Rather than fixating on precise endpoints, set a broad, ambitious direction—like a compass pointing where you want to go. For leaders, it means defining a compelling vision while empowering teams to adapt and innovate. Instead of dictating rigid steps, create the conditions for collective success.

As CEO of Lucid, Peter Rawlinson said: *“I didn’t do it [set goals or targets] on the Tesla Model S and I don’t do it at Lucid. Instead I challenge our engineers to amaze me. Set goals and people stop there. That’s why, I think, our drive units are so much more compact—everyone else was just happy their units were smaller than a combustion engine and gearbox.”* It’s about inviting creativity, not boxing it in.

The Directional Approach in action: 200 billion and counting ...

In the early 1980s, Acorn Computers embarked on an ambitious project to develop a powerful yet affordable processor. Engineers Sophie Wilson and Steve Furber aimed to create “MIPS for the masses”—an efficient, low-power CPU.

Their work led to the creation of ARM (Acorn RISC Machine) architecture, which became the foundation for mobile computing. ARM’s success wasn’t solely due to its technical merits—the company adopted a licensing model that allowed others to manufacture their designs. This wasn’t a predefined goal but an idea that emerged along the way.

Today, over 200 billion ARM-based chips power the world’s devices. They didn’t start with a rigid checklist of targets; they had **The Directional Approach** and adapted to opportunities as they arose.

As we grow, our goals often reflect our shifting priorities and values. The things that motivated us at one stage of life can feel hollow at another. Flexibility and self-awareness are key.

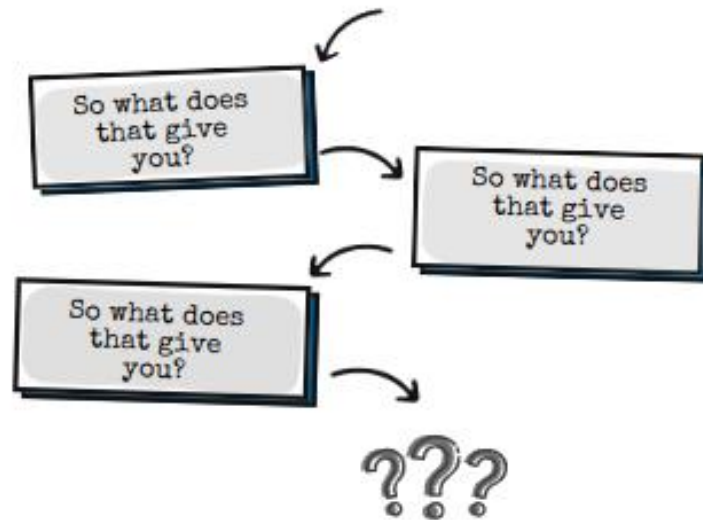
So What?: Rethinking Goals

To lead with The Directional Approach, align your vision with deeper, meaningful motivations. Traditional goal-setting focuses on *what* to achieve and *when*. Instead, ask:

- **Why do you want it?**
- **What will this give you?**
- **What makes me think I don’t have this already?**

Superficial goals lead to temporary satisfaction. Real fulfilment comes when goals resonate with values, identity, and mission.

So what does that give you?



Next Step: Trade the Checklist for the Compass

Here's how to integrate *The Directional Approach* into your leadership and life:

1. **Face the Direction of Travel:** Set a directionality and look in that direction.
 2. **Set Flexible Markers:** Replace rigid goals with adaptable milestones that provide progress updates without restricting possibilities.
 3. **Balance Short and Long-Term Thinking:** Pair immediate targets with a broader vision grounded in your values.
- **Prioritise Ethics and Well-Being:** Continuously monitor for unintended consequences, ensuring goals enhance rather than detract from your integrity and happiness.

Remember, not all goals are created equal

- **Useless Goals:**
 - "I want a bigger house." (Why? To impress others?)
 - "I want to visit 97 countries by Christmas." (Why? Bragging rights?)
- **Useful Goals:**
 - "I want to build a home that lets me bring my family together."
 - "I want to travel widely to experience diverse cultures and perspectives."

The difference lies in the *why*. Useless goals are superficial, driven by ego or societal expectations. Useful goals, on the other hand, align with your core values and lead to meaningful progress. Before setting any goal, ask yourself: *What's the deeper purpose behind this?*

Engage the Deeper Levels: Align goals with your beliefs, identity, and mission. Ask yourself, "What does this goal mean for who I am and the world I want to create?"

As I explore in *Are You Still the Future?*, the secret to peak performance lies not in rigid plans but in managing energy, rather than time. Flexible, energy-aligned markers can help leaders maintain focus without burning out or losing sight of the bigger picture. When you lead with *The Directional Approach*,

you focus less on ticking boxes and more on the bigger picture. You create space for creativity, innovation, and personal growth—qualities that rigid goals often stifle.

The Risk of Getting Your List

Goals aren't inherently bad, but their pursuit must be balanced with purpose, adaptability, and a commitment to growth. As I learned from my 20-goal experiment, achieving a list isn't the same as achieving fulfillment.

So, before you set your next goal, ask yourself: **Am I facing the right direction? Am I chasing the next tick on a to-do list or am I in touch with what truly matters to me? Am I leaving room for the unexpected?**

As a leader, your role isn't just to set goals—it's to inspire a direction, foster adaptability, and empower your team to navigate complexity with purpose. As one of my clients said about his coaching from me at the end of the assignment, "I greatly appreciate working with you. You kept the promise that you made when we first met, that doors to rooms will be opened which I have not seen before."

The risk of 'getting your list' is that you might get what you want, but not get what you really need. But with a compass in hand and an openness to the journey, the unimaginable becomes possible. So, as you plan your next steps, pause and reflect: **are you aiming for what truly matters?** Trade rigid checklists for a compass, and let your path unfold with purpose.

***"Success is getting what you want.
Happiness is wanting what you get."***
—Dale Carnegie

Your role isn't just to set goals—it's to inspire direction, foster adaptability, and empower others to navigate complexity with purpose. One of my clients put it best: *"You kept the promise you made when we first met—that doors to rooms I hadn't seen before would open."*

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Piers in Your Pocket

1. **Remember:** Goals are tools, not truths. Use them not to govern, but to guide.
2. **Set Direction, Not Dictates:** Choose a vision and adjust and adapt along the way.
3. **Embrace the Unknown:** The best opportunities are often unplanned.
4. **Ask Why:** Dig deep into the reasons behind your goals. Are they serving you—or are you serving them?
5. **Leverage Core Motivations:** Understand the values behind your goals and align them with your deeper mission and identity.

Leadership both personal and professional is about steering, not straitjacketing. Let your *direction*, not your goals, define your journey.

Piers Fallowfield-Cooper works with C-suite leaders and their teams to achieve improved performance, stronger relationships and greater personal satisfaction. As the author of *Are You Still the Future?*—a finalist in the Business Book Awards 2024—Piers guides leaders to stay flexible, read the signals in their systems, and remain relevant at every stage of their leadership journey.

Described by a Number 10 insider as “the anti-establishment, establishment coach,” Piers is widely respected for his wisdom, optimism, and warm sense of humour.