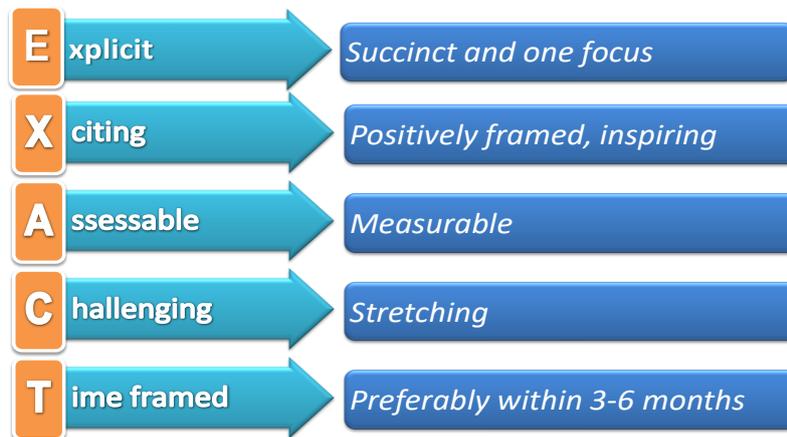




## EXACT: A COACHING APPROACH TO GOAL SETTING

One of the fundamental principles of coaching is to have a clear understanding of where the coachee wants to get to before starting on the coaching journey, hence the requirement for effective goal setting. Many of our goals are determined, perhaps unwittingly, by the agenda of others or pressures upon us to be something we are not. The **EXACT** model takes coachees through a process which helps them to identify objectives which are congruent with their own values and performance style.



Setting a goal according to the above parameters provides energy and focus, and keeps people motivated to achieve what they may not have thought possible. It is said that it takes six weeks will break an old habit and a further six to ingrain a new one. Three to six months affords enough time to achieve a serious goal without losing motivation. The sessions during this period would ideally take place weekly or fortnightly, depending on the coachee's availability.

An effective goal is helped by the brain's own pattern matching system. This function allows us to notice only what is relevant to us *at the current time*, while filtering out the rest. For instance, in a busy airport, you will ignore constant announcements unless your own name is mentioned and this, miraculously, you will hear. Similarly, if someone has identified a powerful goal, the pattern matching system will highlight opportunities they might otherwise have missed.

## Comparison between EXACT and SMART goals

The **SMART** goal setting model is widely used by organisations. There are a number of variations, broadly as follows:



SMART is highly effective when managers are setting goals for their staff, because it encourages the managers not to raise the bar too high, which might prove demotivating. However, in coaching, the goal is set by the coachee, and when we set goals for ourselves we tend to aim low through lack of clarity or confidence. In addition, public goals carry the possibility of public failure, whereas goals set in a coaching relationship should always remain confidential. In my experience, coachees find the coaching journey towards an EXACT goal more meaningful than whether they achieved the goal to the letter.

There is one pitfall with SMART: the goal set could be a negative one, such as 'get out of the bottom league' instead of 'move up a league'. In the former the focus is on the bottom league, so that is what will sit in people's minds, prompting the brain's pattern matching system to pick up on external factors connected to the bottom league.

Further information about the limitations of using SMART in coaching can be found in Sir John Whitmore's book, '*Coaching for Performance*'.

Where **EXACT** differs is:

- The goal has to be positively framed and inspiring
- The goal has to be challenging, to stretch people to achieve their very best

EXACT fits inside 'G' of the GROW coaching model; whereas GROW is a chronological process, EXACT is a description of the Goal part of GROW:



## How to set a goal

Spend some time exploring what the coachee wants and what it will be like when the coachee has achieved it. It is not unusual for people to end a session with a goal quite different to the one they came in with, so this exploratory process is extremely important, to ensure that the coachee will be working towards the most effective goal.

Another benefit of this process is an effect that is recognised in golf, where top players are encouraged by their coaches to visualise hitting the winning shot, to see the ball fly, and hear the cheers of the crowd. This works because, on one level, the brain is unable to tell fact from fiction (which is why sad movies make us cry). New neural pathways will be formed by this process, creating a new habit of winning, which will be easier to repeat a second time around.

People often tend to set goals according to what they think they should aim for, rather than what they truly want. This exploratory process will help them determine a true goal, and when this happens a shift in energy shows up – a smile, sitting up, brighter tone of voice, eyes lighting up etc.

Sometimes people come up with goals that are inspiring but have no clear measure. It is worth spending an extra ten minutes or so brainstorming with the coachee to achieve this. Once a firm measure is in place the goal becomes more compelling; a goal without a measure is a dream, not a target. If it is not possible to get a real measure, you can fall back on a percentage, such as '100% efficient', or a comparison, such as 'as fit as I was in '96, or 'as confident as Peter.'

We tend to set goals within self-imposed limitations. Coaching can help people to give themselves permission to admit to what they really want. One form of this is to set a goal which is part of the pathway to the target rather than being there. Here are some examples:



The strategy is a means to an end, often carrying with it the burden of being a chore. The goal is the end short term result. It may be that on further exploration it becomes clear that the original statement, marked above as 'strategy' turns out to be an end goal for the person. It is for the coach to explore this, not dictate. The test is whether it meets the EXACT criteria, particularly of being inspiring to the coachee.

## Goal setting with teams

Although the SMART model is more effective when setting goals for staff who are not involved in the process, the EXACT model can be used successfully with teams to create a goal. I have known managers replace their usual practice of setting quarterly targets for their teams with EXACT goal setting meetings, where the team creates its own goals. Often these turn out to be more challenging than the ones the manager intended to set in the first place, and people feel more empowered.

## Conclusion

As Lewis Carroll wrote about a girl called Alice who was confronted with many pathways and asked a Cheshire Cat for advice:

*“Would you tell me please which way I ought to go from here?”*

*“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to”, said the cat.*

*“I don’t much care where”, said Alice.*

*“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go”, said the cat.*

*“So long as I get somewhere”, Alice added as an explanation*

*“Oh you’re sure to do that”, said the cat, “If you only walk long enough.”*

- *Alice in Wonderland*

## References:

Whitmore, Sir J. (2009) **Coaching for Performance**. London, Brealey

Wilson, C. (2014) **Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training**. London, Kogan Page.

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