

TOOLS OF THE TRADE



In a regular series, **Carol Wilson** identifies the tools and models frequently used during coaching projects. This month, she looks at the EXACT model

This month we explore the types of goals that are most effective in performance coaching and why they work. Goal setting is fundamental to the solution-focussed discipline of coaching, so let us start by exploring how this came to be so.

Up to the middle of the last century, psychology focussed on identifying what was wrong and fixing it; then Maslow and Perlz, among others, pioneered a new approach that looked at the best that people could be and concentrated on bringing them back to that ideal state.

In the 1970s, a Harvard sports coach called Tim Gallwey realised that, if he left the court for a time, his coachees' techniques improved faster than when he was there to instruct them. He gave this the name of *self-directed learning* and devised a series of questions that would enable this process rather than stifle it. These form the basis of the questioning techniques we use in performance coaching today.

Gallwey's work was discovered by coaching pioneer Sir John Whitmore, who opened a tennis and ski school to develop the Inner Game techniques. Whitmore's team was subsequently invited by organisations to incorporate these new principles into their management training courses by providing a day of tennis coaching. These sessions were given the name *performance coaching* to distinguish them from the rest of the training.

One of the foundation 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, often unwittingly, by the agenda of others or pressures upon us to be something we are not. The EXACT model takes coachees through a process that helps them to identify objectives that are congruent with their own

values and aims. The objective can be termed 'goal', 'outcome', 'mission statement', or any other suitable solution-focussed expression.



- EXciting:** something that will inspire or relieve the coachee, framed in a positive statement
- Assessable:** a measure that will demonstrate clearly when the goal is achieved
- Challenging:** stretching coachees beyond their normal limits
- Time framed:** within a deadline, ideally three to six months. Two more criteria are worth bearing in mind:
- Succinct:** a few words that are easy to remember, so work for us all the time
- One focus:** more than one focus dilutes the goal.

Therefore the acronym becomes 'SO EXACT'. The parameters give the goal energy and focus, keeping us motivated to achieve what we may not have thought possible. It is said that six weeks will break an old habit and a further six will ingrain a new one. Twelve weeks is far enough away to achieve a serious goal, and near enough to maintain 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 reticular activation system, which enables the brain to filter out 99 per cent of our sensory input so that we notice only what is relevant to us *at the current time*. For instance, if you are thinking of buying a particular

model of car, you will suddenly see that model on the road everywhere you go. If we have identified a powerful goal, the RAS will highlight opportunities we 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:

Specific	EXacting
Measurable	Assessable
Agreed/Achievable	Challenging
Realistic/Relative	Time framed
Time framed	

SMART is highly effective when managers are setting goals for their staff because it encourages them not to raise the bar too high, which would be de-motivating. 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. 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 has more meaning than simply 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 to league three'. In the former, the focus is on the bottom league so that is what will sit in people's minds, causing the RAS to pick up on external factors connected with the bottom league.

More about the limitations of using SMART in coaching can be found in Whitmore's book *Coaching for Performance*.

Where EXACT differs is:

- The goal must be positively framed and inspiring
- The goal must stretch people to achieve their very best.

EXACT fits inside the GROW coaching model: it is a description of the Goal part of GROW.

How to set a goal

Explore what the coachee wants to achieve and where she is now, using Goal and Reality questions. Ask her to imagine that she has actually achieved the goal, then explore what she can see, hear and feel around her. What has changed? What new benefits is she experiencing? It is important that she has a real sense of being there, in the future reality where she has achieved the goal, because the brain cannot distinguish between fact and fiction (which is why sad movies make us cry).

It is a recognised sports technique to visualise, say, hitting a hole in one; new neural pathways are connected in the brain, forming the basis of a new habit and tapping into the fact that it is easier to do things the second time around.

This exploration will enable the coachee to identify what she really wants, which may be different to the goal with which she came into the session. You will know when the goal is right because her energy will rise, triggering a change in body language and tone of voice.

Once this change has happened, concentrate on tying the goal down, preferably until it is only a few words long so the coachee can carry it around in her head and it is working all the time for her. You can help form the goal by offering the coachee's own key words back to her. Measure the goal against the EXACT criteria.

Often people come up with goals that are inspiring but have no clear measure. It is worth spending some extra time working out with the coachee a way of measuring her goal. Once a measure is in place, the goal becomes more compelling; a

goal without a measure is a dream, not a target. If it is impossible to get a real measure, you can fall back on a percentage, such as '100 per cent efficient', or a comparison, such as 'as successful as Peter'.

We tend to set goals within self-imposed limits. A coach can help us to give ourselves permission to admit what we really want.

We also tend to set goals that lie on the pathway to the target, rather than being there, for example *'knowing which communication survey tools to use'* rather than *'80 per cent positive feedback from the communication survey'*. The difficulty with the first goal is that it does not imply that the survey will achieve the desired result, or even that it will be run. The coach must challenge the coachee to decide what result can be achieved within the period, but not force her to raise the stakes.

Conclusion

In these busy modern times, the notion of solution focus has become ever more important. Our panorama of portfolio careers, international flights, media, technology and relationships presents a bewildering range of choices. 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

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