



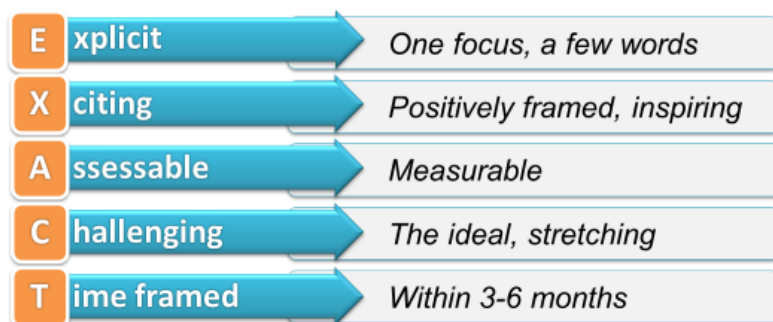
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The EXACT Model: Goal Setting in Coaching

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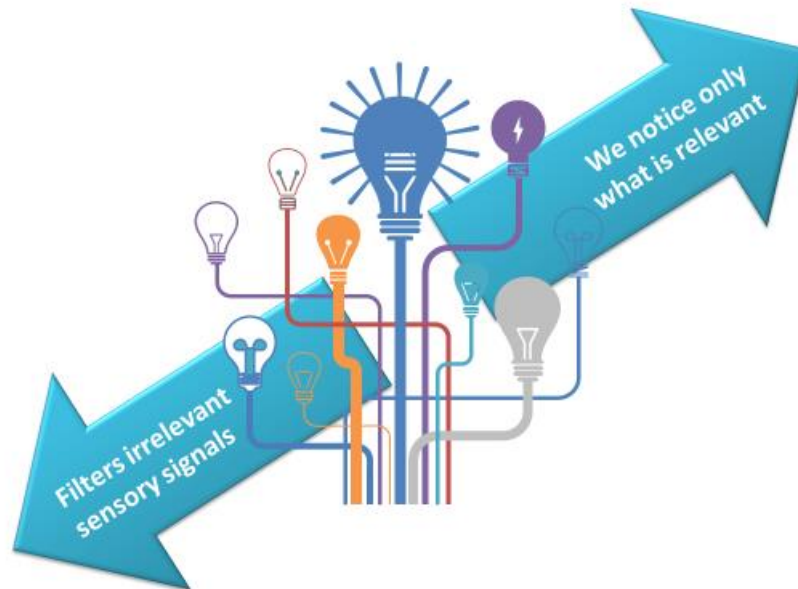
One of the fundamental principles of coaching is to have a clear understanding of where the coachee wants to get to before starting on the coaching journey, hence the requirement for goal setting and the reason the GROW model starts with 'G' for Goal. Many of our goals are determined, perhaps unwittingly, by the agenda of others or by pressures upon us to be something we are not. The EXACT model describes an effective coaching goal, helping people 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 in order to achieve what they may not have thought possible. It is said that the time period required to break an old habit is six weeks with a further six to ingrain a new one. A series of coaching sessions over three to six months affords enough time to achieve a serious goal without losing motivation, and the sessions during this period would ideally take place weekly or fortnightly, depending on the coachee's availability.

The Reticular Activating System

A goal which has been accurately identified by and is meaningful to the coachee will trigger the Reticular Activating System (RAS). One of the functions of this part of the brain is to improve the 'signal-to-noise ratio' of our sensory input by the processing of relevant sensory signals (Hurley, Devilbiss, & Waterhouse, 2004; Moxon, Devilbiss, Chapin, & Waterhouse, 2007; Waterhouse & Woodward, 1980).



This improves cognitive function under noisy conditions, where irrelevant stimuli could impair performance. For example, it allows fleeing prey to detect predators in environments teeming with irrelevant stimuli, and explains why it is that when we buy a certain brand of car, suddenly we see that brand everywhere. Another example is being in a busy airport, where announcements are continually broadcast - we do not listen to any of them, but if our own name should be mentioned, it immediately wins our attention. If we have a meaningful goal in our sights, the RAS may highlight helpful hints which we might otherwise have missed.

Comparison between the EXACT and SMART goal models

The traditional business model for setting goals is SMART. The words in orange are not part of EXACT, while the words in yellow are not in SMART:



Although a SMART goal may be positive, it can result in a negative goal, such as ‘get out of the bottom division’, dragging our focus back to what we want to get away from, instead of forward to what we want to achieve. Goals like these carry all the baggage of past failure and future anxiety, so end up feeling more like chores than opportunities. An equivalent EXACT goal might be ‘get into the top division’.

SMART goals work well for corporate goal setting, where targets are set by managers for other people to achieve. In this context there is a tendency to set the goals too high, which is demotivating to the teams who have to achieve them. Therefore the goals need to be reined in during the setting process, and must be ‘realistic’ or ‘achievable’. This is what SMART was created for and it remains the appropriate model to use in this situation today.

However, when we set goals for ourselves, we tend to set limits which arise from past failure, fear of challenge and lack of self-belief. This is why we challenge people to set higher goals for themselves when taking the coaching EXACT approach.

How to set a goal

It is worth taking some time exploring what the coachee wants and what it will be like when they have achieved it – I recommend spending at least the whole of the first session on this. It is not unusual for people to end a session with a goal that is quite different from the one that they started with, as well as a whole lot of new awareness and insight, so this exploratory process is important.

The benefit of this exploratory process is to embed the goal by creating new neural pathways, a process that features in sports coaching when top players are encouraged by their coaches to visualize hitting the winning shot in order to make it easier to do so in a real game.

Start by asking the coachee what they want to achieve. The response may be a goal, a problem, or a vague idea. Ask one or more Reality questions, like ‘Can you tell me some background?’ Now spend some time exploring the ‘future reality’, helping the coachee to imagine what it will be like after they have achieved the goal. A clear idea of the goal will start to emerge and you can make a note of words which seem to carry the most resonance. Mentally check the goal against each component of EXACT, and ask the coachee questions which will enable them to meet the criteria:

- Explicit:** If the goal has several focuses, ask which one will ensure that all the others are met, or simply which one does the coachee want to focus on for this goal? An effective goal is a few words long, and of one focus. Then we can carry it around in our heads all the time without having to look it up.
- Xciting:** Positively framed and inspiring. Whenever a coachee talks about wanting less of something, ask what, then, do they want more of?
- Assessable:** Ask questions like ‘how will you know when you have got there?’ or ‘how can you measure that?’ If it is impossible to identify a measure, accept an alternative which sounds emphatic, such as a percentage, e.g. ‘80% more motivated at work’, or a comparison with the past, e.g. ‘as energetic as 2005’. Goals set in coaching sessions are confidential, and may change during over a series of sessions, so it is not as essential for a wholly quantitative measure to be identified as it would be when setting a SMART goal for a team to reach. But the more tangible the measure is, the more motivating the goal will be, so it is worth persevering to make the goal as measurable as possible. If it is not

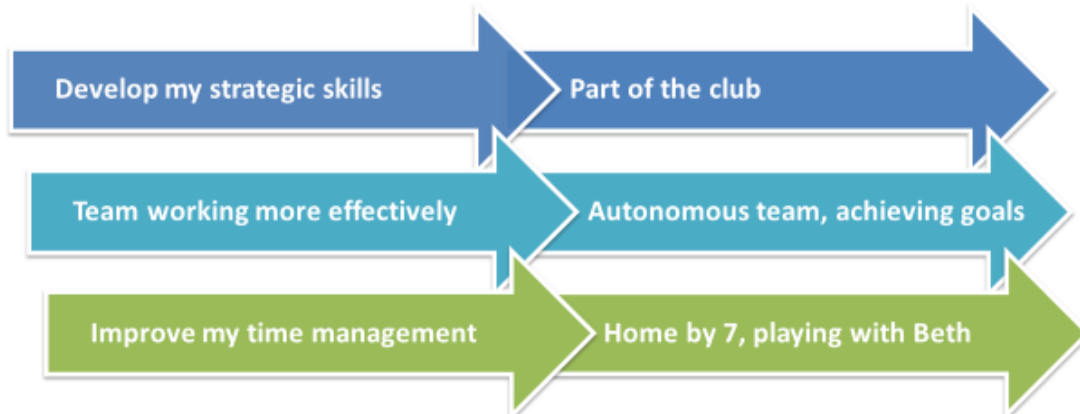
possible to get a real measure you can fall back on a percentage, such as '100 per cent efficient', or a comparison like, 'as fit as I was in '96', or 'as confident as John'.

Challenging: We tend to set goals within our self-imposed limitations. A coach can help us to admit to ourselves what it is that we really want. 'Can you give yourself permission to want that?' is a useful question if you sense the coachee is holding back. Ensure that you are asking coachees to stretch themselves, not directly challenging them yourself, for example, 'What do you really want, in an ideal world?' not 'You should set a higher target!'

Time framed: Three to six months is an ideal deadline. It may also be effective to set a goal around an existing milestone outside of that time frame, if that works better for the coachee. Explore this issue thoroughly so that coachees can make an informed decision about the period. It is also useful to identify the long-term goal, say five or ten years ahead, although the focus of the coaching should be on a shorter term goal that can be achieved during the coaching series.

Strategies and outcomes

When setting goals for themselves, people have a tendency to aim too low, often naming as their target something that is really a strategy or stepping stone along the way, for example:



If this happens, challenge the coachee to consider what end result can be achieved within the period and what the real desired outcome might be. When they identify their real actual goal, you will notice a change in energy, expressed in tone of voice, body language and facial expression.

It is always possible that what sounds like a strategy may actually be an end goal for the coachee, meeting the criteria of being exciting and motivating. It is the coach's job to ensure that this aspect has been properly considered, not to dictate whether the goal is acceptable. The change in energy is the key to knowing when you have identified an effective goal.

Case history: one-to-one coaching

My colleague James Wright once coached a young, single mother of two autistic boys and who worked as a teacher in a special needs school for similar children. In spite of being eminently qualified for her job, the teacher encountered sarcasm, inappropriate comments and general lack of support from the Principal of the school.

James started by helping her to set three goals, with the intention of working together over a 12-week period, meeting once a week. One was aligned specifically to her work situation and two others concerned personal issues. The work goal was about proving her worth to her boss, and she worded it provocatively: 'I'll show him!'

James voiced his concern that the outcome was to an extent controlled by a third party, namely the Principal; suppose he chose not to 'be shown?' Then the outcome of her goal would be in his hands, not hers. However, she insisted on this wording, saying she found it motivating. During the second session, James helped the woman to work out a set of strategies, beginning with a written account of the current situation and how she felt about it, and a vision in writing of how her life would be when she achieved the goal. Other strategies were created around the issues of confidence and self-esteem, and it was here that her insights came thick and fast.

In the fourth week of coaching, however, it was proving difficult to create a really strong 'energy' about the goal in spite of its provocative title. Her commitment to this goal was dwindling, as she found that despite her efforts to support pupils (including introducing some extra-curricular activities that had not been provided before), the Principal remained as ambivalent as ever towards her. She declared that she was considering giving up that goal and concentrating on the other two. James asked whether she might like to consider re-framing the goal in words that reflected outcomes entirely within her control, and she agreed to think about it.

Two days later, the woman phoned James to say she had something important to discuss. She went on to share that through exploring her confidence and self-esteem during the coaching, she had become aware of the extent to which she did in fact value herself, her academic and professional achievements and her remarkable energies as a single working mother to two demanding boys. Since the previous coaching session she had confronted herself with a number of challenging questions about what was truly important to her, writing down her responses and posting them up on the walls of her home as affirmations.

Through this process of self-exploration she had begun to see her life from a new viewpoint, where she became the centre of her own world. This was a different perspective from her previous one, where other people's perceptions of her had always been at the centre. She said that her stated goal 'I'll show him!' no longer fitted and that she had asked herself the question, 'How can I make this goal all about me?' She found that a revised goal had come naturally to her and she worded it in the present tense: 'I am an amazing Educational Consultant.'

She told James that just hearing herself say these words changed the way she felt. When James asked what she intended to do about it, she replied:

'Well, I hope it's all right but I've already taken a couple of actions that ^[1]~~we~~ we didn't agree on in our coaching session. Yesterday, I went into school early and demanded a meeting with the Principal, told him what I thought of him and his methods and attitudes, and told him to shove his job! handed him a resignation letter I'd brought with me and walked out there and then.'

James assured her it was indeed 'all right' and said, 'You know you're right – I definitely don't remember hearing about those actions! So tell me, what happened next?'

'Well I drove straight to the local Education Department and told them what I had done. They actually congratulated me and said they were impressed I had lasted even 18 months with that Principal, because his misogyny was well known. Two hours later I walked out with 77 days of consultancy booked in my diary at £750 per day, with more to follow.'

She reported that she felt elated and that by centring the goal specifically around herself, she was able to ‘take back the reins’ and ‘chart her own course’ with immediate and life-changing results. James asked what she had learned from this turnaround.

‘In future,’ she said, ‘any time I set myself goals, I’ll just remember to build them around me, remember who I am, what I want, and that nothing and no-one can stop me!’

So the simple but practical learning for coaches is that when setting goals with coachees, we must make sure that those goals are phrased so that their success depends on the coachee – they must be PERSONAL, and not about creating something for someone else. That is where the motivation really lies when the going gets tough, as it invariably does with challenging goals.

An effective and practical way of achieving this is to ask searching questions about what is truly important to the coachee. Ask how they can put in place reminders of what they personally can influence, as James’s coachee did with her post-its all over her walls.

Goal setting for teams

Although the SMART model is effective when setting goals for staff who are not involved in the process, the EXACT model can also be used successfully with teams to create a goal if they are involved in the process. 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. Meanwhile, people feel more empowered because they have ownership of the goal.

This is explored more deeply in my article ‘Team coaching: the Generative Thinking Meeting.’”

About the author



International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Culture at Work and a Fellow of the Institute of Leadership & Management, the Professional Speaking Association and the Association for Coaching, where she is a member of the Global Advisory Panel. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations worldwide and has won awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of *‘Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training’*, now in its third edition and featuring Forewords by Sir Richard Branson and Sir John Whitmore, and *‘The Work and Life of David Grove: Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge’*. She has contributed to several other books and published over 60 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.