CENTRE FOR COACHING
IN ORGANISATIONS

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Keeping an eye on the goal

Are goals the starting point and the primary focus of coaching and mentoring conversations? Or do they emerge out of a lengthy, more open-ended exploration of the issues?

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Coaching is often depicted as a linear process through which goals are i) agreed at the beginning of an assignment ii) form the focus of coaching for several months thereafter iii) assessed at the end of the assignment. This perspective on goals doesn't reflect the reality of today's volatile, ambiguous and complex world. Some authors even suggest that focusing on goals in this way can get in the way of performance[ii]. In this paper we report the outcome of research into the life of some real-life goals and consider the implications for best (coaching) practice.

The study

I spoke to 11 participants receiving coaching as part of a leadership development program. I spoke to them individually four times over the course of eight months, asking them each time to describe their goals and describe how and why their goals had evolved. Reflecting on those conversations, four kinds of goal evolution emerged.

1. **Simple**. In some cases initial goals were formed, worked on, and disappeared (presumably because they were achieved), to be replaced by new goals. This kind of fits classic goal theory.

2. **Morphing**. One participant originally had a goal around communication. 'Communication' meant adopting more discipline around a reporting process. Three months later 'communication' came to mean sharing information more generally with the same stakeholders. Three months on, and 'communication' meant engaging direct reports and decision makers with a compelling vision. By the end of the program 'communication' meant establishing effective two-way dialogue with everyone who needed to be engaged in achieving widespread change. This fundamental and significant shift in meaning wasn't reflected in the reports being submitted by the coach.

3. **Perspective shifting**. Another participant established initial goals around being a great coach, becoming more self-aware, more emotionally intelligent and more influential. The wording attached to the goals didn't shift over the course of the program, but once again, the meaning behind the words changed significantly. Her perspective had changed, her way of thinking:

   "These are still goals, but … now it's not about have I got better emotional intelligence than someone else. Now it's about showing up as me, more. Both personally and professionally I want to continue being more authentic."

4. **Unconscious to conscious.** One participant struggled to name goals at the beginning of the assignment. Not long after the assignment began, some things happened in his personal life that demanded all his energies. When things calmed down, and he focused again on his work-life, he formed a whole set of new goals that appeared to have become clear to him while working on more personal issues.

I asked people what factors played a role in the ongoing evolution of their goals. Not surprisingly, people talked about changes in the workplace, such as new roles, structural change and shifting priorities. They talked about factors outside the workplace too, and linked changes at home to shifts in mindset that showed up at work. And they talked about their relationships with others, including - but not only - the coach. When external factors changed, they turned to others to make sense of those changes, and from those interactions emerged new intentions.

A systemic perspective

These findings make perfect sense when viewed through a systemic lens. Leadership theory has traditionally been dominated by the idea of the 'heroic' leader, an individualistic perspective that fails to acknowledge the function of relationships in the evolution of change. As Ralph Stacey[iii] put it:

"Each individual is simultaneously evoking and provoking responses from others, so that … particular … themes emerging for any one of them will depend as much on the others as on the individual concerned. Put like this, it becomes clear that no one individual can be organizing his or her experience in isolation because they are all simultaneously evoking and provoking responses in each other."

In other words, whilst we (at least 'we' in the western world) may see ourselves as wholly autonomous beings, managing our own thoughts and making our own decisions, the reality may be different. When Archimedes cried out '*eureka!*' in his bath, he may have taken all the credit for coming up with volumetric theory. But was it all his doing? Likely the insight emerged from conversations with lots of other ancient Greeks. From this perspective leadership emerges from the

interactions between people. So what implications does this have for the way that we coach?

1. Beware of being too SMART

The GROW model, if misused, can lead us to think of coaching as a simple linear process in which we help someone set a goal, then move on to consider what we will do to achieve that goal. The goal, once set, is never reviewed. The SMART approach is to make that goal as specific, measurable, and targetable as possible, so enabling effective action planning. But there is little to be gained in nailing a goal down to its specifics if it isn't the right goal in the first place. And SMARTening up a goal may deter both you and the coachee from revisiting that goal. How much energy do either of you have for dropping a goal once you've invested so much energy into detailing it? Sometimes being SMART may be appropriate, but before you push in with your SMART agenda, notice where the coachee's energy is. Are they as keen as you are to get into the detail at this stage?

2. When coachees don't do their homework – get curious

Many coaches come to supervision worried that their coachee didn't do their homework. *What am I doing wrong? Is my coachee truly committed to the coaching process?* From a systemic perspective I may not be particularly surprised that my coachee didn't do what they said they would. Change is constant. The world shifts and priorities evolve. As things change, so the coachee seeks to make meaning of those changes by talking to others (you're not the only person your coachee talks to!) From those conversations emerge new insights and intentions. The coach can play a useful role by seeking to understand what happened. And if we're feeling super-systemic the coach my also reflect back the coachee's response to not having done what they said they would do, and notice what that says about the coach-coachee relationship.

3. Take every opportunity to engage with other stakeholders

With many clients we may have limited opportunity to venture outside the coaching room. This limits our capacity to understand the system in which the coachee operates. So we can encourage our clients to let us loose! We can advocate the value of three-way meetings, for example, of conducting stakeholder interviews, even shadowing our coachees as they go about their daily lives. By getting out there into the coachee's workplace, we can get a personal sense of the factors that are playing out in the evolution of their goals. This enables us to come to the coaching conversation with a better understanding of their world, and an enhanced capacity to be useful.

4. Contract, contract, contract!

'Contract' is one of my favourite coaching words! If stuff changes and changes all the time, then what to do? How can I know if we are still working on the right goal or not? The answer is straightforward – just ask. Ask the coachee every time you meet how their intentions and objectives have changed since you last met. Ask them how their goals have evolved as the result of your conversation. If you have the opportunity, talk to other stakeholders as to their perspective on how things may have changed.

These are just some of the ways in which we can work differently with goals. Rather than think of a goal as a stake in the ground, an unchanging reference point to which we can point at any stage in the assignment, the goal becomes something dynamic. Something vibrant and elusive, something to be checked upon constantly, lest it evolve into something completely different, leaving us working on something irrelevant and uninteresting.

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Notes & Acknowledgments

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iii. Stacey, R. (2016). *Tools and Techniques of Leadership and management. Meeting the Challenge of Complexity*. UK: Routledge