Impossible Goals

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Does your organization establish goals that seem impossible to reach? If so, you are not alone. Many organizations go through a negotiation process with individuals and teams to establish annual performance goals. Often, the person or team is asked for their opinion on the best that can be achieved in the following year. Then, just for good measure, senior managers tack on an additional 15 to 25% and set that as the target goal.

When employees learn to anticipate this markup process, they instinctively sandbag their initial offer to account for the anticipated bump by senior management. It becomes a game of cat and mouse to establish reasonable stretch goals, and in the end, the organization and its employees suffer. I believe a better process starts with an understanding of what the entire organization needs and then breaks down individual and team performance goals that will ensure the organization meets its commitments.

Quite often, goals set by senior managers seem unrealistic or unobtainable, which has a significant negative impact on trust. When this happens, employees take on a fatalistic viewpoint that the team has no chance to perform up to expectations. Team members hope they can achieve the goal, but deep down they don't believe it is possible. This creates a Pygmalion effect where the negative outcome is nearly guaranteed.

The truth is, you cannot "hope" your way to success. You must believe and expect success for it to become reality. When stretching for seemingly impossible goals, the most important ingredient is not technology, market size, manufacturing capacity, quality processes, sales force expertise, HR policies, or any other tangible enablers. The most important ingredient is belief. This fundamental principle has been identified by philosophers and social psychologists numerous times throughout history. It seems that, through the ages, our civilization keeps discovering the same ideas. Here are a few famous quotations from historical figures you may recognize. Notice how they all say the same thing in different words.

Zig Zigler – "When you believe it, you will see it."

Earl Nightingale – "We become what we think about."

Brian Tracy – "If you think you can do it and hang on to that vision, you will accomplish it."

Henry Ford – "If you think you can, or if you think you can't... You are right."

Lou Holtz – "If you get people to believe in themselves, they will set bigger goals."

Maxwell Maltz – "What you believe will happen actually becomes physical reality."

Norman Vincent Peale – "The power of positive thinking: No success occurs without it."

Andrew Carnegie – "You will not be able to do it until you believe you can do it."

Tony Robbins – "Beliefs have the power to create and the power to destroy."

Napoleon Hill – "What the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve."

This list is just a small sample of available quotations on the same topic. The phenomenon of creating success by visualizing it already being accomplished is well known. Unfortunately, most teams in the working world have forgotten this time-honored wisdom. They wring their hands and lament that achieving the goal set out by management is simply impossible. Well of course it is impossible if they believe that.

Quite often, teams believe they can't accomplish the goal because they cannot visualize how it could possibly be done. It is important to not get discouraged at the start because the "how" is not evident. Forget about how you will accomplish a goal; simply set out to believe that it will happen. There are many tools available that can help you accomplish the goal. Resolve to find the right ones for your situation. If you do that, you will achieve the goal in ways you could not possibly imagine at the outset. Unfortunately, it is easy to experience the pangs of fear.

The antidote is to teach individuals and teams to re-train their brains so that they drive out any thought of failure. Set the goal high, and then use all the power of mind over matter to make that goal a reality. That sounds so simple, but it is very difficult to gain the skills required to believe rather than doubt.

Experts like the ones above, have taught us that if we reiterate an affirmative statement that we not only intend to meet the goal but to exceed the goal, then repeat that phrase in earnest at least twice a day for 30 consecutive days, we will actually bring forth a vital energy that was unavailable prior to the new mindset. It is not the rote repeating of an

affirmation that makes the difference. The method gives us a chance to catch the difference between the positive attitude and any negative thoughts or feelings that arise. We then have a moment of truth where we have the opportunity to examine what is holding us back. As we address these self-limiting beliefs, we can come into mental and emotional alignment and resonance with the affirmation. We become energetically congruent with the vision, and that brings forth powers that are truly amazing.

Having this resonance and congruity changes everything. Of course, a positive mental attitude is not the only factor that will allow us to meet difficult goals. We have to have a good plan, we have to execute well, we have to have high trust and great teamwork, we have to work incredibly hard, we must employ lean and six sigma principles, we need the right technology and resources, and, yes, we sometimes need some luck. The truth is that by having the right frame of mind at the outset, we enable the other necessary elements to materialize in the physical world. When we expect and believe we will achieve the goal, sometimes the elements required to accomplish it materialize as if by magic. It is not magic; it is simply how the universe works.

I am not reporting anything new here, but I believe it needs to be reiterated, especially at the end of the year when goals for the next year are being set. This is the time to create a new mindset that will allow you and your team to consistently reach or exceed seemingly impossible goals.

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