

# PROXIMATE GOALS INSTEAD OF AVOIDANCE GOALS



All organizations have goals. We set goals to measure whether we achieve a certain result and whether working towards a specific target pays off. Or to measure how well we convert resources into products and services over a period of time. The importance of setting good goals is something that is addressed in most courses and books on personal improvement as well as organizational and business development. People even do doctorates in it! Nevertheless, goals are something we struggle to achieve, especially goals that instruct and motivate us. It seems particularly tricky to set goals for diversity and inclusion.

The goals we usually see related to diversity and inclusion in our organizations are either too long-term or too non-specific, blunt, or simply mis-focused. This makes them difficult to use during a change journey. They provide very few instructions on how a team should break them down and use them for the specific changes they need to make and perform better as a group.

To succeed in including diversity to a greater extent than you do today, not only do you need to set overall goals to provide a direction, but you also need to set goals along the way. In the popcorn metaphor, I talk about motivating you as special popcorn to achieve results quickly. One way of doing this is to measure your

results using guidance measures or proximation goals. This will help you to evaluate whether your efforts to include diversity are heading in the right direction – and further down the line, help you determine if you have reached the ambition level you want.

To work, guidance measures must be completely aligned with the results that your team wants and needs to achieve. Goals without a connection to your business risk leading change in the wrong direction. To succeed, you need to describe the desired results of increased inclusion as specifically as possible. Think: “We want to change from current approach X to desired approach Y within timeframe Z.”

**A common mistake we humans make is to set so-called “avoidance goals”. In private contexts, this can be about things like stopping streaming bad series online, drinking less wine on weekdays, or eating less junk food. In a workplace, it may sound more like: drop the use of bad jargon, avoid asking the same people for advice all the time, or recruit fewer employees from X university.**

Unfortunately, these types of goals are rarely effective. Such goals can even be counterproductive! Goals that are formulated

as things we should avoid or get rid of lack detailed descriptions of how we should actually achieve a goal. And when we realize that we do not know how to tackle a problem, we tend to doubt our own ability or the purpose of even trying to put energy into achieving a goal. Therefore, avoidance goals often have a direct negative impact on our well-being and our ability to bring about change.

Guidance goals or proximate goals are active rather than passive; they provide clear instructions. Think about the difference between saying “empty the dishwasher once a day” and “stop leaving dishes in the kitchen”. Or “for all start-up meetings, we invite a focus group with representatives from departments X, Y, and Z” rather than “reducing the number of project decisions made by [name of specific person(s)]”. When we have something to work towards, we also feel that we can influence the result.

**By setting goals that clearly describe how to make progress, it also becomes easier to see success. We can tick off proximity goals. We know if we achieve them or not, and if we have done so, we also gain the experience of what it led to and how it felt.**

## SMART BEHAVIORAL GOALS

When you know what type of goal you should not formulate in your work to include diversity, how do you create a really good goal? To start with, you’ve probably come across the SMART model that was developed in the 1970s. The model – its name is an acronym of Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound – turns up from time to time in slightly different forms, but the message is always the same: set concrete goals.

The model is based on work psychologist Edwin A. Locke conducted in the 1960s when he studied the relationship between goals and how people performed in relation to them. He compared data compiled over nearly a decade and found that specific

and challenging goals were better than vague do-your-best goals or no goals at all in 90 per cent of cases.

Linking goals to activities – something we do – is especially successful with major changes. In their book *The Critical Path to Corporate Renewal*, American researchers Michael Beer, Russel Einstat, and Bert Spector provide an in-depth analysis of six companies to identify what works and does not work in terms of upgrading strategies and working methods. The study on which the book is based divided the six companies into three groups: the most successful (top third), the average (middle third), and the least successful (bottom third).

It was about as common for companies to set targets for their change journeys, (89 per cent of the top third compared with 86 per cent of the lower third), and a typical goal was improving inventory turnover by 50 per cent. But a stand-out finding was that the more successful companies were more likely to set behavioral goals, (89 per cent of the top third versus 33 per cent of the other two thirds). A behavioral goal could be, for example, that project groups meet once a week or that each teams include at least one representative from each function in the organization.

When you establish your goals, make sure that they help you to move forwards. Dream big but start small! This is what we’ll have a look at now.