

A Goal Too Far

By Mike Stewart, CSP



Achieving a goal can be de-motivating! This surprising statement certainly flies in the face of conventional wisdom that tells us goals are very motivating. Nevertheless, recent studies by Brian Knutson, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Stanford University does indeed support this conclusion.

Anticipation of achieving the goal provides more satisfaction and happiness than actually taking ownership of the objective according to the results of this prestigious research.

Why did I feel so let down when I drove the car of my dreams home several years ago? I had set a goal to own a certain German automobile that I had deeply desired for years. I tied that goal to a specific business achievement. At last I realized my goal was within reach and I was deliriously happy when I ordered the car and paid the deposit.

There must be something wrong with me I thought. Who would not be happy driving what is generally considered to be the finest mass-produced passenger sedan in the world? But I felt somewhat dismayed and strangely dissatisfied with this universally admired symbol of success. I wondered if it was simply buyer's remorse, which I came to doubt, or something far more important.

It had been a goal too far for way too long, and I made the debilitating mistake of setting it as THE goal. It became the ultimate dream for me, and a friend helped me realize that I had nothing in my sights to strive for after I achieved this long sought-after prize. Here is the lesson to be learned from this experience:

The journey is the prize, not the destination. Your journey needs to be ongoing while each intermediate destination is merely a stepping stone on the way to what you ultimately hope to achieve. The further destinations help keep your eyes on the prize and your motivation level high.

It is okay to enjoy your intermediate goals.

When I told my friend Doug about my feeling disappointed and let down after buying my car he asked if I planned to sell it. "Heck no!" I exclaimed. It's a great car and I really enjoy owning and driving it, but I see it less as a symbol of success and more as a symbol of failure that reminds me to learn from my mistakes.

Don't get stuck believing that you have achieved real success when you reach an intermediate goal. We have all seen this happen way too many times. The young woman who thinks she has it made when she marries well only to discover that that the journey has just begun. The man reaching retirement who finds himself miserable with no purpose to his life.

As long as life goes on, so should the journey. Whether it is just getting up and going to work every day or achieving a major turning point, never be satisfied as you approach the fulfillment of an objective. Instead, identify your next goal and plan ahead for it's achievement. One after another, these intermediate goals represent the stepping stones of your career, and your life.

Enjoy the trip!

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