Tip sheet: The importance of goal setting

A goal is akin to having a map showing you where you are going. It saves time and energy as it provides focus and helps you complete tasks and projects. Goals motivate and focus your mind ensuring that you don't get distracted or waste valuable resources on irrelevant work.

According to Edward Locke and Gary Latham (1990), setting goals affects behaviour and job performance, as well as helping mobilize energy which leads to a higher effort overall. Goals help motivate people to develop strategies that enable them to perform at the required goal level. Accomplishing the goal and receiving constructive feedback can lead us to satisfaction and further motivation which in turn helps develop a high performing team.

Top Tips for goal setting with your team:

1. **Provide clarity and focus** – we need to be clear on what the goal is and schedule in time for the inputs which will help us achieve our goals. When we schedule time we are able to minimise distractions and we have clear accountability. Make sure you give your team members adequate time or a timeframe in which they are accountable for working towards their goal.

2. **Build in some pressure** – Some form of pressure helps us to stay on track with our goals. This can be both internal such as working to our core values or external e.g. deadlines, working with other members of the team or other stakeholders. Once a deadline has been clearly articulated it can be helpful to plan backwards in order to ensure these can be realistically met.

3. **Communicate a clear purpose** – When we are clear on the reason we've set the goal, it will help us engage with and believe in the outcome. It is important to start with the "why" as this creates stronger motivation and understanding of why the goal is important in the first place and can drive momentum. Can you link a task or goal to a bigger purpose for your team e.g. their career aspirations, a research impact or a collective goal of the group?

4. **Consider the skillset** – When we set a goal, we need to consider the skills required to do the job well. Do your or your team member feel that they might need any training or support? If you are not clear on what is required in terms of skillset it can lead to disengagement and ultimate failure to reach the goal.

5. **Develop autonomy** – setting a goal and delegating some or all of the work required to achieve it can be an excellent tool for team member development as well as allowing you as the PI to free up your time. High performing teams thrive when we give people the ability to truly own some aspects of their work, and your aim as a research group leader is to develop independent researchers.

6. **Use the SMART framework** – the SMART goal framework is explained below and gives you a greater chance of achieving goals. Answering the series of questions, will help both you and your team members to set 'SMART' goals for themselves and aspects of their projects. It is worth answering these questions at the start of the project and for each task. You could also use these questions for each team member to set personal goals for themselves during the project.

SMART Goal Setting Questions

Specific

- What exactly do you want to achieve?
- What is the output you wish to have?
- What question do you wish to answer?
- What specific impact would you like to achieve?
- Why are you doing it? What are the benefits?

Measurable

- How will you know when you have achieved your goal?
- What will be different or new?
- What could you quantify to know that you have met your goal? What would be a desirable target to set to know you have achieved your goal?

Agreed

- Who else is this goal relevant to? Your 'stakeholders' (Who could influence or be affected by it?)
- Do you have agreement from those who are affected by, or could influence your goal?
- Do they know their respective roles?

Realistic

- How realistic is it that you will achieve your goal?
- Do you have access to all the resources, people and time you need to achieve the goal?
- What might stop you achieving your goal?
- Do you have control over everything that will help you achieve your goal? If not, can you regain control by change some of the actions or processes required to achieve it?

Time-bound

- When will you have achieved your goal (give a specific date or number of days/weeks)
- What are the intermediate milestones at which you can assess progress?
- When will you meet those milestones?

You may want to watch this short video from Mindtools on the SMART framework How to Set SMART Goals - YouTube