

Be clear about what you are trying to achieve

"You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose."

Dr Seuss

Goals can come in all shapes and sizes. So before you start, you need to be very clear in your mind about where you are trying to get to. What do you really want to do? Become a best-selling novelist? Be promoted to a high-flying role at work? Build a school in a poor underdeveloped part of the world? Start your own business? Win a gold medal at the next Olympic Games? Get to the top of your academic field? Be a professional deep-sea diver? Whatever it is, if you are going to successfully use your ambition to achieve your ultimate goal, you need to have a very strong sense of where you are heading before you begin. Otherwise you will get lost long before you reach your destination.

By taking the time now to think hard about what your ambition looks like, you can dramatically improve your chances of success before you even start. Just make sure your ambition has these six essential ingredients:

1. Your ambition should be big
2. Your ambition should be measurable
3. Your ambition should be personal
4. Your ambition should make a difference

5. Your ambition should be achievable
6. Your ambition should be something you really, really want to do

Let's look at each of these in turn:

1. Your ambition should be big

It may sound counter-intuitive but having a big ambition actually improves your chances of success. If the ultimate goal you are trying to achieve is too small, it can be easy to feel that you don't need to make much of an effort to achieve it. Which invariably means that you don't make any effort at all. So inevitably, nothing changes. And your ultimate goal never gets reached.

If, on the other hand, you have set yourself a big challenging goal, then if you are to have any chance of achieving it at all, you know you must face it head on and be fully prepared. And leave nothing to chance because it is going to take every ounce of your focus and energy to even have a shot at getting anywhere close to it.

In the 1960s, American psychologist Professor Edwin Locke did a lot of pioneering research into the link between goal setting and performance. After reviewing a decade's worth of laboratory and field studies, he found that in 90% of cases, setting specific and challenging goals led to higher performance than setting easy goals or "do your best" goals. He concluded that the more difficult a goal is, the harder people will work to achieve it.

This is why people might successfully build a house from scratch when they have never even put together a flat-pack bookcase, or run a marathon when they have never found the motivation to join a gym. Big becomes easier to achieve because it sits itself right in your sight line and flatly refuses to budge until you do something about it.

There is a wonderful children's story by Jack Kent called *There's No Such Thing as a Dragon*. It is about a small boy called Billy who finds a small dragon at the end of his bed when he wakes up one morning. He goes to tell his mother about it, but she refuses to admit that the dragon is real, even as she cleans the house around it, climbing in and out of windows because the dragon is in the way. So the dragon grows and grows and grows, until it has grown so big that it walks off with the house attached to it. It is only when the postman has to chase after it down the street and Billy's father has to climb up the dragon's back to get into the house, that his mother is finally forced to acknowledge its existence. "Why did it have to grow so big?" she asks. "I'm not sure," says Billy, "but I think it just wanted to be noticed."

Make sure your ambition is big enough for you to notice it.

Remember, if nobody laughs at your idea and tells you that you must be mad to even think of trying to do it, you are setting your sights too low. Much too low. Any successful person will tell you that at some point in their lives, probably more than once, someone has quietly taken them to one side and told them firmly to give up their ambition because they will never succeed at it. If everyone nods their head in approval and tells you what a great idea it is, you are doing it all wrong.

2. Your ambition should be measurable

Every weekend in Scotland, dozens of enthusiastic climbers set out to pursue an activity known as Munro-bagging. This is the act of climbing a Munro, the name given to the 282 highest mountains in Scotland over 3000 feet. They are named after Sir Hugh Munro, a Scottish mountaineer who first catalogued them back in 1891. It is possible to bag several Munros at a time, or even to try and tick them all off in one go – the current record for climbing them all in one continuous round is just under 40 days.

It is an immensely popular activity, and with good reason. That's because goals are much more satisfying to achieve when you can measure them. Whichever Munro you choose to bag, you've either climbed the mountain, or you haven't. There is no middle way and no room for doubt. (Check out www.munromagic.com or www.walkhighlands.co.uk/munros for more information if this sort of thing interests you.)

The fact is people are more likely to achieve their goals if they are measurable, simply because they are easier to see, and easier to aim for. And because you know for sure when you have got there.

3. Your ambition should be personal

When he was a child, Edward Peppitt fell in love with lighthouses. He says: "My love of lighthouses came from holidays spent at my grandma's house. I had the attic bedroom, and the lighthouse at Dungeness nearby flashed through my bedroom window and lit up my bedroom wall. Aged about six, that left quite an impression. It made me want to stop

and look at lighthouses on other holidays, which in turn led me to want to visit them all.”

As he grew older, Edward promised himself that one day he would cycle around England and Wales, visiting the 203 working and former lighthouses built along the coastline. But work and family commitments meant he never quite got round to doing his trip. Then in 2012 at the age of 43 he was diagnosed with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis, a debilitating condition that caused him to go temporarily blind for three months and his legs to go numb. Edward, who ran a publishing business, also had chronic fatigue, which left him unable to work, and debts started to mount up. He says: “It never crossed my mind that things would ever be the same again. I was in complete denial for six months and hit rock bottom.”

Fortunately Edward discovered Shift MS, a social network and support community for people with the disease. With their support he realized that just because he had MS it did not mean he had to give up on life, or indeed on his long-held ambition of visiting the lighthouses. So he started training three times a week, cycling 15–20 miles each time and in May 2015 set off on his 3500 mile journey, with the additional aim of raising £25,000 for Shift MS. As well as the lighthouses on the mainland, he planned to visit the islands, including the Isle of Wight, the Scilly Isles, Lundy and the Channel Islands, and beg for ferry crossings and fishing fleets to visit the rock lighthouses too. Much of the trip was over rough and inhospitable terrain and Edward nearly gave up several times, overwhelmed by the rain and wind and the loss of his iPhone. He also missed his three children. But he kept

going and three months later achieved his ultimate goal. You can see his journey at www.thebeaconbike.co.uk.

Edward is clear about why he undertook such a huge challenge. He says: “I spent a lot of time at charity coffee mornings, where lots of people with MS would sit around a table and moan about their latest symptoms. I hated that. So if I have achieved anything, it’s to demonstrate that MS does not mean a life sentence of ill health. One may need to make compromises, but someone with MS can still achieve pretty much anything they want to. I want people with long term conditions to be inspired and stay positive.”

He adds: “It is not about weathering the elements, it is about a personal challenge. Life goes on. Just make the most of every day.”

4. Your ambition should be achievable

One of the main reasons people don’t achieve their ambitions is because their ambitions are unrealistic. If your ultimate goal doesn’t have any chance of becoming reality, you will be wasting your time. If you are over 30 and still dreaming of becoming a professional footballer, for instance, it is time to find a new goal.

Don’t set yourself up for failure by letting your ambitions get bigger than your abilities. Your ultimate goal has to be attainable otherwise you are just kidding yourself.

You also need to avoid goals that depend on the actions of others – or which require technical advancements beyond that which you can achieve yourself. Otherwise you will not only set yourself up for immense frustration as you wait for

someone to get on with inventing or creating the thing you need, you will also give yourself the perfect excuse for procrastinating indefinitely.

Ask yourself:

Does your age, height or other physical characteristics make your goal impossible?

Is there a certain level of natural talent you absolutely need to have in order to achieve your goal?

Does someone else need to invent something or create something before you can achieve your goal?

If the answer to any of the above is yes, you may need to think again.

The good news, however, is that even if your ultimate goal in its current state is unrealistic, it may be possible to tweak it until it becomes a goal you could achieve. Even if you don't meet the criteria to be accepted into a top international ballet school, you could still start a dance company of your own. Look at your goal carefully and consider if there might be a plan B. There is often more than one way to get to the top of a mountain.

5. Your ambition should make a difference

When Alan Barnes, a frail disabled pensioner, was attacked outside his home in Gateshead and broke his collarbone, Katie Cutler, a 21-year-old beautician who didn't know him but read about his story in the newspaper, set up a fundraising page for him in support. She wrote on the page: "Alan is too frightened to return to his home so with the help of his sister

he's looking for new accommodation. I'm trying to raise £500 for Alan, which will help him towards the cost of relocating, in order for him to feel safe and carry on with his life. I was so upset that anyone could target a disabled pensioner and be so cruel. We can't take away what has happened but with a little donation we can make the future a prettier one and help towards the cost of his new home. Thank you all."

Katie initially hoped to raise £500, but as donations poured in from around the world, she ended up raising £330,000, enough to buy Alan a new house. People got in touch to offer practical help too, from building work to legal advice.

Katie has now set up a charitable foundation (www.katiecutlerfoundation.co.uk) to raise money for other worthy causes. In 2015 she was awarded a British Empire Medal by the Queen in recognition of her achievements.

The best kinds of goals are the ones that make a real difference – to your life, to the life of others. They are the kinds of goals that push you to the limit of your capabilities and beyond, which in the process change you and those around you for the better. If it doesn't much matter to you or anyone else whether you achieve your ultimate goal or not, the chances are you never will, because there will never be that sense of urgency driving you forward.

6. It should be something you really, really want to do

Think about what you really want out of life. What is it? The whole point about ambition – and indeed life – is that it's yours. It belongs to you and no one else. Don't ever fall into

the trap of trying to achieve someone else's goal. Life is too short. It is so easy to do, particularly if it is your parents' dream and you want to please them and make them happy. But if your goal doesn't make you want to leap out of bed in the morning or sing in the shower, forget about it. You have to want to do it, a lot. Because otherwise you will give up before you get there. Half-hearted won't work.

Michael Hayman is the co-founder, with Nick Giles, of Seven Hills, a campaign consultancy that has won many awards. He also co-founded the StartUp Britain campaign to encourage entrepreneurship in the UK. Michael has also made no secret of the fact that he wants to grow his business to be as successful and influential as Saatchi & Saatchi, which was the world's largest advertising agency in the 1980s.

Michael says that having a clear goal has been hugely important to him: "The very best advice I was ever given was from a headhunter who told me, you have got to start at the end and work back, because if you know where you want to finish up, the journey becomes much easier. That was a real Damascus moment for me. Because until that point I had a sort of ill-directed ambition that I wanted to do something, and to be someone, but I really had no idea about where I wanted it to take me."

Knowing the end goal has helped him to stay focused, he says: "When it was just the two of us, buying furniture in Ikea for our office, the goal felt like a long way away. There I was, pontificating away to Nick about how we were going to be the next Saatchi, and the next moment, I was saying, do you think we will be able to put this desk together? But we have a very clear ambitious goal. I want to build the best. I want the best team, the best company. And I have a sense of what the journey might be, and how it all fits together."

This focus has also given Michael the confidence to make bold choices. At Seven Hills he has introduced a concept called Project Unsackable, which, he says, “is all the mad ideas we have which would have got us sacked in someone else’s company”. The ideas this has generated have already become key chapters in the company’s history – the StartUp Britain campaign, the MADE festival for entrepreneurs held in Sheffield every year, and now a book, *Mission: How the Best in Business Break Through*, which sets out the company’s campaigning purpose.

Michael says: “One of the proudest moments of my life was seeing the StartUp Britain bus go round the country. I remember turning up in Nottingham and seeing people queueing down the street to get on it.”

Goals are good. Make sure yours is clear enough to see.

Over to You

1. Write down your ultimate goal on a piece of paper and date it.
2. Now study it carefully. Is it big enough for you to really get excited about? Is it realistic enough for you to think you could achieve it?
3. List three ways in which achieving your goal would improve your life or the lives of others.

“Ambition beats genius 99% of the time.”

Jay Leno, US comedian and talkshow host