WHEN GOOD GOALS GO BAD

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*This is the second of two articles – the first titled '**Who's calling your shots?'** is available in the Real Estate Coach Library.*

In an effort to improve their performance, a sportsperson may train to the point of injury. They don't do this intentionally, of course, but by pushing themselves too hard over a relatively short term, they apply too much stress, resulting in damage and pain, effectively losing many of the long term benefits they sought.

Often the problem results from **focusing on one specific activity**, such as shooting goals, to the exclusion of others, such as passing the ball or anticipating an opponent's moves. It's essentially the dark side of training.

The dark side of goals

Goals have a very real potential dark side. In this article, I have selected just three issues that can adversely affect goals and their performance –

- Applying the wrong goal objective
- Goals that inhibit learning
- Moving the ethical goalposts

The wrong goal objective

'We urgently need more listings!' cried the branch manager. Everyone was exhorted to go and find more listings. Each salesperson was given a target that theoretically coincided with their level of experience. The more experienced salespeople had higher targets than the less experienced. A substantial financial reward was offered to the 'winner'.

At the end of the period, there were certainly more listings within the office.

But the manager was miserable. In an effort to support the project, he'd agreed to discount the commission on several properties, in order to help secure the listings. Many turned out to be overpriced for the current market, as a result of overly optimistic market appraisals. There were also a number of dissatisfied clients, complaining that their properties weren't being marketed effectively. So, what had gone wrong?

Many of the staff had perceived the goal simply as 'Get listings at almost any cost.' The competition had had no focus on actual sales, just procuring listings.

While these are critical to success, there are certain caveats that need to be applied:

- the listings must be actually saleable, and
- unless it is made clear to the clients at the outset that they are solely responsible for any advertising costs, the office needs to at least have an adequate budget for corporate advertisements.

What had previously been a reasonably happy, mutually supportive team quickly dissolved into a group of independent combatants.

The overall result was that a number of 'For sale' signs were erected, languished for several weeks, and were eventually removed. Negative results tend to generate a negative perception from clients.

Goals that inhibit learning

Often goals are set that focus entirely on performance. There's a listing or sales target to be reached, without giving due consideration to what may be learned along the way. Mistakes are almost inevitable, but if the culture of the organisation is such that only tangible achievement is measured, many mistakes are swept under the carpet rather than discussed openly.

But a salesperson, or other staff member, who continues to repeat mistakes is likely to become an unacceptable cost to the business.

Effective learning can take place at any time, from a casual chat over coffee to an intensive programme of study. But the time taken for learning doesn't always generate immediate income. Sometimes staff are discouraged from attending seminars or courses on the grounds that this takes them away from their actual performance goals. But **failure to learn always generates a cost** – sometimes a very significant one.

While quantitative measurements of learning may be difficult, unless there is formal recognition by way of a certificate or something similar, it is usually possible to identify qualitative improvements in performance. But ours is an industry which seldom rewards for such things. We tend to limit ourselves to financial and status awards. In a challenging market, prior learning will often generate a higher level of performance than previous achievement alone.

Moving the ethical goalposts

In cases where one (often financial) goal becomes paramount, there sometimes follows a tendency to cut the corners of quality or ethics, with potentially serious consequences.

In situations where one person is (openly or tacitly) **rewarded for moving the goalposts** in such a way, others are likely to follow.

Behaviours such as taking personal credit for someone else's achievement, failing to divulge relevant information about a property to colleagues, or falsely insisting that only the listing salesperson has been given approval to show a property are not entirely uncommon. If these, or similar actions aren't immediately curtailed, they're likely to be copied by other members of staff. After all, if it's being tacitly condoned by management, why not?

Hitting the target

So far, we've considered how goals can move over to the dark side. But surely, people don't intentionally set out to aim for goals that will result in adverse performance?

If a coach says to a player, 'I want you to shoot 100 goals now,' but doesn't stay to watch, is the player more or less likely to conform? Much will depend on the motivation of the player, and his level of respect for the coach.

Often, in real estate, management set targets, such as the number of prospecting contacts for a given period, and so on. But, in many cases, it's virtually impossible for management to track actual performance. If goals are set artificially high, there is sometimes a tendency to report that they have been met, rather than to admit that we fell somewhat short.

This can lead to a **spiral effect**. If the original number of contacts hasn't achieved the desired number of listings, set the prospecting target higher! Of course, this takes little or no account of the actual performance, nor any need to identify why the result wasn't better. Was it lack of skill or technique, requiring further training, or something else?

Is goal setting bad?

Of its own accord, emphatically not. But, goals that are set without consideration of the impact they're likely to have (both short and long-term), those that inhibit learning and development, or those that encourage a lowering of ethical standards, all carry the potential for adverse results.

One size does not fit all

Just the sheer fact of setting goals doesn't guarantee their success. Goals need an element of flexibility, to stand up to the challenges ahead.

They have to be compatible with other significant goals. They have to be clearly measurable, and individually challenging. There should be no 'one size fits all' when it comes to intelligent goal setting. What will challenge one person will leave another yawning with disdain.

The most satisfying work-related goals encompass a range of achievements, not just one. There is likely to be a financial component, mixed with one of personal satisfaction and self-esteem, and the increased knowledge that has come through striving to do better.

Just like a well-trained, highly skilled basketball player, the goals we set need to be supple, flexible and adaptable to changes in circumstance. Each goal is likely to be reliant (at least in part) on other goals, just as players in a team are reliant on one another.

Just remember, like an athlete who starts to believe too much in his own strength and ability, **goals, if not carefully set and well managed, can turn to the dark side**. You might win the game, but lose the tournament.

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