
Some Thoughts on Goal-Setting

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Much has been said in recent years about the value of goal-setting and of guiding our lives toward predetermined objectives. This process has taken on many of the aspects of an exact science. It has found expression in the world of education in the form of “behavioral objectives.” In the corporate and industrial world it manifests itself in a “management-by-objective” philosophy.

Some individuals feel that unless each hour of each day is programmed to achieve specific objectives, life cannot be lived to the full, and personal potential is being cheated. In fact, this general notion has become so universally accepted that to question the value of goal-setting in any public or private enterprise is probably regarded as irrational.

Setting goals and objectives to guide one’s efforts can be demonstrated to yield positive results. It is a process, however, that can also be restricting and limiting when it is distorted or misguided. It is important to hold this process in the right perspective when we seek an understanding of the principles that lead to human progress.

An important distinction must be made between the potentially confining aspects of setting specific goals and the much more encompassing need of having a general purpose in life. This distinction is more than a play upon words. One’s purpose in life has an overriding influence on what he does with his time, energy, and resources. It can also have a profound effect upon how he relates to other people. Without this sense of purpose, life has no compass. Within the framework of such a purpose, there is an acceptable place for much spontaneity and flexibility. Indeed, without this freedom, life can become stilted and sterile, and much of the potential for inspiration and renewal can be thwarted.

Unless the goals and objectives an individual works toward are harmonious with his general purpose in life, a devastating kind of internal conflict can develop which is destructive to happiness and personal development. Appropriate, useful goals and objectives must be a direct outgrowth of one's perceived purpose in life. Otherwise they can lead to a random expenditure of effort and resources that may not contribute effectively to long-range progress.

Purpose entails much that is qualitative; it does not always lend itself to quantitative measurement in terms of numbers, percentages, size, and volume. Yet in today's material world most objectives are considered to be meaningless unless they are expressed in quantitative terms and are susceptible to measurement within these terms.

It is important for us to remember that worthwhile goals and objectives can be qualitative as well as quantitative; that is, they can relate to the quality of people, things, and relationships, as well as to numbers and size. In a materialistic society, much more attention and validity seem to be attached to quantitative goals, probably because they are more easily measured and reflect more directly profit and loss, material growth, and production. This should not lead to the conclusion that attainments of a qualitative nature are less important than those that lend themselves to easy numerical measurement. In fact, in the realm of moral and spiritual things, qualities may be much more significant than quantities. The nature of one's relationship to others may have more value than his "productivity."

There is no conclusive evidence that working toward quantitative objectives always produces beneficial qualitative effects in one's life. Indeed, a too-intent focus upon the acquisition or production of quantities of things may actually obscure the need for qualitative development; and in the world of spiritual things, this could be a deterrent to the attainment of the goals that matter most.

The material world places a high premium on quantitative things: gross national product, profit margins, sales and production quotas, interest rates—all are the substance of corporate life and death. Men and women ascend to positions of power and authority on the basis of their ability to *produce*, and on their capacity to get others to do the same. In this arena, product can easily be thought of as having greater importance than people. In fact, people may come to be viewed simply as a means to enhance production. Since product is measurable, success and achievement can become product-centered. Goals and objectives in this environment are generally and understandably of a quantitative nature. Survival depends on it.

Interestingly, such a focus on attaining measurable objectives seems to generate a tendency to program production methods that will guarantee acceptable production levels. This can apply to sales quotas as well as to quotas of materials that flow from the production line. Programming and regimentation of procedure will result in an acceptable minimum production level and thus provide a safe profit margin. Systems, processes, and programs therefore become essential in most profit-making enterprises.

Offering material incentives to stimulate sales or production is also a common practice. Competition for notoriety and power as well as for material rewards is generally intense. Of course, all of this helps to increase production. In this atmosphere of competition and struggle for

preeminence, the adage “when performance is measured, performance improves” generally holds true, especially when position and compensation are at stake. When objectives can be expressed quantitatively in terms of profit and loss and when peoples’ continued employment and promise of reward are based upon meeting these objectives, then the management-by-objective system becomes a reasonable and profitable approach to administration.

Whether this approach can be applied with equal success to the attainment of spiritual and moral qualities is open to question. Spiritual qualities do not necessarily develop in the same environment as that which fosters the attributes esteemed in the material world, nor can these spiritual qualities always be accurately measured in a quantitative way. The qualities of the spirit *are* susceptible to assessment, but they must be assessed by spiritual means. True, they often are reflected in individual lives in observable ways (through feelings, attitudes, commitments, and perceptions), but they are not always easily measured in a quantitative way at arbitrarily established audit periods.

At one time Elder Adam S. Bennion drew attention to the fact that Abraham Lincoln probably saw his first slave auction at about age sixteen. While this experience undoubtedly left a profound impression upon the young man, he did not immediately go and produce the Emancipation Proclamation. The additional experiences that brought Lincoln to a course of action in opposition to slavery all made their contributions to the final outcome, but their individual effect was not overtly measurable at particular points in his early life. One’s assessment of what was happening in his consciousness and conviction would likely have depended upon subtle perceptions and discernment.

The same is true of one who experiences conversion to the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This conversion process can be a lengthy one, and it can have a profound effect upon one’s purpose in life. But its progress cannot always be accurately assessed by measurable performance at arbitrary points in time.

Those who attempt to measure qualitative growth with a quantitative measuring system of necessity must look for a “product.” This product generally takes the form of some overt behavior or performance which can be counted and evaluated numerically. The frequency or regularity of the performance is taken to be a direct reflection of the quality of commitment possessed by the individual who is being measured. Since the numbers or percentages now “produced” by the responsive individual become the prime measuring rod of devotion, the tendency increases to program and regiment specified kinds of behavior so that the numbers or percentages will look good. Those who devise the programs and the prescribed activities must now demonstrate their success on the basis of the numbers produced.

In this process the importance of people and their intrinsic qualities can easily become subordinated to their production of measurable data. If the data is good, the people are presumed to be progressing qualitatively as well. Unfortunately, history and experience prove that the system does not always work. Inevitably it has produced discrepancies and distortions. Such was the case with the children of Israel under the law of Moses.

One of the most difficult challenges for the Apostle Paul and other missionaries in the meridian

of times was the unyielding loyalty of the converted Jews to the ritualism and outward performances of the law of Moses. Even those who accepted Christ and became baptized members of his church had great difficulty in relinquishing their ties to the law. Apparently, many of them insisted on perpetuating, even after baptism, the programs and practices which had been developed over many years by the Jewish religious leaders. Some of them insisted that gentile converts to the Church also adopt the practices of the law of Moses.

Their insistence on perpetuating these things within the new church was a constant source of concern for Paul. It was even an occasional cause for discord and misunderstanding among church leaders, as Paul indicates in his letter to the Galatians (see [Gal. 2:11](#)). There is evidence in the book of Acts that some Christian Jews attempted to convince Paul's converts that they must adopt the programs of the Jewish law as well as the principles Jesus taught. This led to a major controversy in the church and precipitated a general-level leadership conference in Jerusalem, which Paul attended in order to represent the views of the gentile Saints.

The account of this conference, which can be found in [Acts 15](#), is most revealing. It discloses the intense loyalty that many Church leaders still felt toward the programs and procedures of the old law. This loyalty was obviously an outgrowth of a deep-set conviction on the part of some Church leaders that the "works of the law" were essential to salvation and that individual progress and perfection could not occur without a strict observance of the rituals. After "much disputing" at this conference, Peter made an attempt at a compromise that would free the gentile converts from adherence to the provisions of the law, but which would apparently allow the Jewish Christians to continue their old practices if they chose to do so. While Peter's recommendation was accepted by this conference, it is apparent that the issue was not settled. Adherents to the practices within the law of Moses continued to press for an acceptance of their position. Many years later, when Paul visited Jerusalem once again, he encountered the same controversy (see [Acts 21:17-24](#)).

This loyalty to and affinity for programs that were an outgrowth of the ritualism and regimentation of the past proved to be a great obstacle to accepting the simple, basic principles of the gospel. For the converted Jews, whose lives had been so filled with the programmed requirements of the law and whose religious commitment had been demonstrated by their outward observance of these requirements, the religious life outlined by the gospel of Christ must have seemed very open and unregulated. It was not easy for them to leave the feeling of security provided in the total regimentation of the Jewish law. Obviously, they could not understand how the gentile Saints could possibly be trusted to develop any of the qualities prescribed by the new beliefs without the same set of regulations and programs to guide them and fill up their lives.

As the Savior confronted this same problem among the Jews, he not only decried the meaningless machinations which the law had imposed upon them, but he blamed this outward ritualism for having crowded out of their lives the qualities of virtue, charity, and compassion. He accused the Pharisees and scribes of fostering this hypocrisy: "Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

“For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do” (**Mark 7:6, 8**).

He accused them of being like whited sepulchres, impressive in their outward show, but inside full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness (see **Matt. 23:27**).

It appears that the Savior was not only concerned with the unproductive effort required by the programmed processes of the law, but he was also alert to the inevitable diversion away from the development of the important inward qualities of life that are so essential to salvation.

Paul attacked this same problem in his great admonition to the Corinthian Saints on the subject of charity (see **1 Cor. 13**). To the Galatians who had begun to experience the freedom offered by the gospel of Christ, Paul said:

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

“Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.

“For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love” (**Gal. 5:1-2, 6**).

There is sometimes the danger that the true purpose of an endeavor can be lost in the compulsion to make the records look good. As an example of this, I cite an incident recently related to me by a young wife who had just gone through the trauma of losing a baby through premature birth. Throughout the month of semiconfinement that preceded the misfortune, members of the Relief Society in this sister’s ward made frequent calls on her to comfort her, to bring meals for the family, and to be of general assistance. Their caring concern and attention had been much appreciated.

Following her release from the hospital, this sister deeply felt the need to spend some private time with her scriptures and in prayerful quest for understanding. She reported that on a day at the close of the month she was at home alone, particularly impressed and inspired by some part of the scriptures she had been reading. A sweet spirit of peace and consolation rested upon her, and she felt a closeness to the Lord and the reality of his love in a way she had never experienced before.

She was absorbed in this experience when the telephone rang. She reluctantly answered. On this occasion the call was to solicit a time during the day when an official Relief Society visit could be made to present the lesson for the month. When the sister asked to forego the lesson in view of the fact that the visiting teachers had already been in her home several times during the month, and more especially because she did not wish to have her refreshing interlude with the scriptures interrupted, she was reminded that this was the *last* day of the month. On the earlier visits the official lesson for the month had not been presented. Therefore, the visits could not be counted.

Reluctantly, the sister left her scriptures and cleaned her house in preparation for the visit of the

visiting teachers. The spirit of the morning was lost and was replaced by a feeling of resentment and hurt. The visiting teachers' perfect record remained intact—but at what cost?

As members of the Church and human beings in general reach for a higher level of moral and spiritual attainment, they will be required to more clearly define the principal purposes in life. They will need to be motivated more toward the qualities of life associated with moral and spiritual growth than toward producing or acquiring quantities of things. Historically, people have always achieved their highest levels in material things as a by-product of their attainment of high spiritual and moral qualities. It has never occurred in reverse order.

Goals and objectives within the framework of life's true purpose can be helpful in motivating and maintaining general direction. The more important of these will be of a qualitative nature, and their achievement must be evaluated more by discernment and observation than by quantitative measurement. In such an environment the doctrines of the priesthood will distill upon the people as the dew from heaven. Whatever dominion is achieved by man over himself or over material things will not then come by compulsion, but as a natural and inevitable result of his having qualified for such an endowment.

Let's Talk about It

After reading "Some Thoughts on Goal-Setting," individually or as a family, you may wish to discuss some of the following questions during a family gospel study period:

1. The author points out that goal-setting can produce negative as well as positive results. What could be some positive results of goal-setting? What could be some negative results?
2. How can having an overall purpose in life help us set specific goals?
3. Quantitative goals—to earn so much money, to get A's on exams—can be measured mathematically. What are qualitative goals? Which are more important?
4. Are there any goals in your own life that may not support your overall purpose in life? What qualitative goals (such as compassion, charity, tolerance, generosity) would you like to work toward? How could you or your family help achieve these goals?

Gospel topic: goals
