

Goals are stepping stones towards a progressive future

George Mallory (1886-1924), a well known English mountaineer for his attempts to climb Mount Everest, said about his repeated attempts to conquer Everest: "*You must know the end in order to win the end.*" This is just as true of finding solutions in coaching. Customers must be helped to paint a clear picture of their desired future in order to reach that future. Eliciting concrete and realistic goals are part and parcel of this clear picture.

Customers often have a problem in describing their goals. There are many reasons for this. One of the main reasons is that they are stuck in the past of the problem. Most coaching approaches to change have a problem-leading-to-solution sequence where the problem is analysed to determine the root causes before goals are set. In Solutions Focus we prefer to start with a clear description of what will be different if the problem is resolved. We want to elicit a clear picture of the future as a safe place where people are the architects of their own destiny. We believe that solutions are not necessarily directly related to the problem and that solutions are of a different order than problems. In focusing on the preferred future we help the customer escape their stuckness in the problem and past and engage their imagination in creating a picture of the future without the problem. This helps to discover building blocks for formulating goals. What will be different? How will it be different? What will they notice as different? What would they do differently? What will others notice that is different? What will significant others do differently then? It is important to create this picture in terms of behaviour as goals cannot be set in terms of feelings.

Once a clear picture of the future emerges, we ask the customer to evaluate where they are now in relation to this desired future. What of this future is already present even if it is only in a very small way? When is this future present even a little bit? Who did what then? Where and how did they do it? We want to elicit instances of the future in the presence. It is always there but seldom noticed by the customer. Looking for exceptions to the problem and counters of the progressive future gives the coach the opportunity to amplify and reinforce the differences that make a difference that can lead to a solution.

From these exceptions and counters we help the client to formulate their own goals. Goals should be reasonable. Reasonable is not the same as realistic. Customers can change beyond our expectations and predictions. Reasonable is to be possible. Reasonable goals are build on the strengths and resources of the customer, doing more of what works already. Well-formed goals have certain characteristics:

- It is concrete, behavioural and measurable.
- It is described in inter-actional and situational terms - what significant others will see, experience and do and how that in turn will influence the own behaviour.
- It is defined as the presence of something desired rather than the absence of the problem. Something absent is not really measurable.
- It should be under the customer's control – something they can do independent of what others do.
- It must include the idea of hard work – this gives dignity to the customer no matter what the outcome. If they are successful then the customer is unusually successful. If they fail then it is because most people find it difficult.
- It is the beginning of something rather than the ending of what is not wanted. The end of something is not necessarily progressive towards the future.
- It is a small step rather than the final result.

One of the biggest mistakes a coach and customer can make in co-creating goals is to see goals as a final result. As human beings we live in living systems of complexity where, in a changing world with so many variables, the future can only be an emerging and unpredictable future. Goals should therefore be set as small experiential steps. Small steps have the added value that it is easier for the customer to do, they have more energy for it and it is a low risk experiment. If it does not work we can easily adapt and try something else without the customer losing face. It is important to lower the bar of goals in such a way that the customer cannot but see it as reachable. Goals set as end results leave no room for adaptability in emerging circumstances and make customers lose heart. As we are part of living systems small changes will inevitably lead to bigger changes. It has a snowball effect.

Goals and their achievements provide a major theme in coaching for building stepping stones to a progressive future for the customer and in organizing descriptions of positive change and solutions. Without goals there is no contract and no way to know that coaching is finished. Without goals coaching remains in the realm of problem description and makes no sense.