

The New Year's Resolution – Explaining why Goals Fail and How to Set More Effective Goals – by Brian Baxter

Welcome to 2006. Did any of you set a New Year's Resolution (or 12)? Have you kept them all? How many of the have you already written off as impossible? Have you ever wondered why New Year's Resolutions so seldom stick? Beside the fact that changing human behavior is hard, trying to change it in the days after staying out all night and having a little too much champagne, these are the main reasons:

- 1 – Too general
- 2 – Lack of support system
- 3 – Doesn't account for unexpected events
- 4 – Too hard or unrealistic
- 5 – No consistent check in

These are the main reasons that people fail to achieve their goals. The same can be said for team goals. In sport psychology research and literature, goal setting is one of, if not the most consistently proven factors in facilitating performance. However, when goals are not set properly, they are not as effective as they could be, and can even be harmful.

As a coach, setting effective goals for your team is crucial to their success. First of all, it's important to define what success is. Success will be different from team to team and can include improvement of technical or tactical ability, wins, stats, or just having fun.

When setting goals with a team, it's easy for a coach to set the goals and expect the team to follow. But if the players don't share that vision for the season, those goals will almost certainly not be attained. (Getting back to the New Year's Resolution theme; imagine trying to live up to a Resolution set for you by your spouse or your parents) So it is important for a coach to allow the players to be part of the process and give their input. The more ownership they feel, the harder they will work for it.

After getting a good sense of what you want and what the team wants, it's time to set SMART goals.

- Specific
- Measurable
- Adjustable
- Realistic
- Time Based

When setting SMART goals, it is easier to avoid the problems like the 5 listed for the failed New Year's Resolution. So for each goal you set, check to see if that goal is SMART. Here are a few examples:

Goal 1 – Our goal is to get better this year.

Okay, that's a fine goal, but this may mean different things to different players. And if half the team thinks they are getting better because they are working harder and the other half thinks they are not because they are not winning, you have a divided team.

A good way to make this goal more effective is to make it SMART, by first asking: Is it Specific? If it is not, then ask the goal: How? How will we get better this year? Break it down into specifics and measureables, make sure they are adjustable (for those unexpected events such as injury) and realistic, and build in a time frame to check in on progress.

Goal 1 then looks more like this: Our goal is to become a better passing team by focusing on our individual technique each and every practice for the next two weeks.

This is a good goal because it targets a specific skill. It is measurable (for instance in a scrimmage how many passes completed in a row). It is also adjustable, realistic and time-based.

Goal 2 – Our goal is to win the league.

Once again, there is nothing wrong with the sentiment behind this goal. It is specific, measurable, and time-based. It may or may not be realistic, but it is certainly not adjustable. If you happen to start the year 0-2, this goal may do more harm than good (again, remember how easy it is to give up on a New Year's Resolution... in January!). The drawback to this goal is that it is focused solely on the outcome of games and not the performance or process of playing the game.

So once again, to make this goal more effective, we ask questions: How? How do we win the league? What part of our performance can we strengthen to make this goal possible? Upon every answer, there is a smaller, more digestible, more effective SMART goal.

Setting team goals is one of the best ways for coaches to keep their players on the same page, keep them motivated, and give them a say in the direction of the team. Like the New Year's Resolution, team goals are great on paper, but often falter due to some unfortunate human tendencies. But when goals are SMART, they can be a real and an effective method to attaining success.

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