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## THE WELL-FORMED GOAL

How to create goals that can inspire action in the “moment-of-choice”?

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Individuals do what they do because of emotion and don't do what they know they should do also because of emotion. It is emotion (and associated impulse) which lead to the thoughts / choices that drive our actions in the moment of choice. Therefore, achieving personal change or improvement goals depends on being able to create a strong image of the desired outcome state linked to a “felt sense” of well-being, satisfaction or positive emotion. In this way, the goal can be made “available to the mind” when life gets in the way, providing a strong “beacon” to inspire/guide action in the moment!

As such, the WFG process makes use of our emotions and also uses language as a “device” that can help us easily recall the emotion, often via imagery or metaphor.

The key for the Client to determine what she really wants, and by when they want it, and then to ask a number of further questions so they can contemplate what might happen and how they and others might feel either:

1. When tangible outcomes resulting from the desired behaviours begin to arise, or
2. When they begin to *express* the desired behaviours (irrespective of outcomes)

Later in this article I have set out some questions which you can ask others to get them thinking about their goals and aspirations rather than only problems or remedies (solutions to problems), and to have the consequences of movement towards the goal “sink into the bones”.

### 2 WHERE DOES WFG FIT?

The WFG process is one of a number of ways that we help a client to work towards a clear goal that is capable of inspiring the necessary action / behaviour in what we call the “moment-of-choice”. It is not the only lens, and it may be useful to apply other simple lenses as you work with the client (e.g., the 5 criteria). In T-GROW coaching, the coach should ensure, as far as possible, that a goal is “Well Formed” by the end of the reality phase of the conversation (this doesn't mean that goal won't change as the coaching continues. It probably will change! And if it does, it should be regarded as a good thing as it generally increases increasing clarity about what's really important and what competency requires strengthening or developing.

A deep exploration of reality will ensure that a goal is well formed in that it is specific, do-able by the client, set in a context (when, where or with whom), has “impact” (if done or not done), that the client has the resources (internal and/or external) to make the necessary moves / changes and that the goal is positively stated. It is during reality that the client is most likely to realise if some of the necessary elements are missing, for now, and / or there are other factors that need to be resolved before the necessary movement can occur (including, e.g., acquiring a required skill or competency or, cultivating patience or presence, etc).

## 3 CHARACTERISTICS OF A WFG

### 3.1 THE “ESSENCE” OF A WFG

In a very small nutshell, a WFG has 2 main characteristics:

1. It is expressed succinctly and concisely in a way that is easy to remember, and
2. When brought to mind it brings up a “positive emotional charge” which both facilitates “remembering” and pulls the Client past resistance or interference arising in the moment.

#### *3.1.1 Succinct and Concise*

While we often say that it's emotion that drives behaviour not language, language is important because it “points to” and can “recall” emotion which, once recalled, underpins behaviour. As such we encourage clients to articulate their goals using concise and clear language which is easy to remember. But this isn't the real point. The real point is that .....

#### *3.1.2 Brings Up an Emotional “Charge”*

The idea is that when the goal is “brought to mind” (perhaps with a short phrase or even word or even action that represents it), then there is a cascade of “remembering”. Remembering resources, mind-states and, most importantly, an emotional experience that serves to “power” the necessary actions, practices or behaviour in the moment – driving us past the interferences that inhibit “skilful” action and leads to being “stuck”.

### 3.2 THE SCRIP MODEL

Once a goal is genuinely well-formed then, unless something changes in the life of the client, movement occurs smoothly and easily as impediments (including what needs to be let go of) are mentally rehearsed and dealt with. In this way, the client is less likely to be hijacked by an old “reactive” pattern which has kept them stuck in mental (and then behavioural) habits.

Remember, this is not to say that goals may not change along the way. Changes may happen as Clients become more and more aware of what is most important to them as they deal with interference that arises on the journey. They may also change as Clients realise that there are “preconditions” to the “achievement” of the original goal. These preconditions may become goals in themselves.

An example of this is with a leader who was working towards the outcome of developing “executive presence”. She had set a goal to listen more and talk less in meetings as a core element of that. This would appear to be a simple goal, but often there are many components to this simple goal. This leader had a habit of constantly interrupting others and “oversharing” her own opinions. She realised that her goal needed to be further sharpened to “I want to become self-aware enough to know when I am being drawn in to this pattern and to adjust my behaviour accordingly”.

The practices that came from this included mindfulness and somatic awareness practices together with cultivating, installing and “remembering values and aspirations that support the kind of leader she aspired to be. The practices also involved experimenting with questioning and languaging patterns which provided the conversational skill in moments of stress.

A Well-Formed Goal, then has the following components:

## 4 THE SCRIP MODEL



### 4.1 SPECIFIC YET CONCISE

Assuming we have basic information about the client’s topic, the core of the WFG process is to elicit specificity as far as possible. All the other elements of the process, while they have differing “labels” (such as Context or Impact), they are really about increasing specificity and clarity, thereby making the choices of behaviour more “obvious” in those key moments of choice. The idea is that a WFG should be able to inspire movement in such moments. That means a number of things need to be identified.

These include:

1. What, indeed, are the key moments where there is an opportunity to practice new behaviours (contexts)?
2. What is the goal and all of the benefits associate with it? What positive outcomes might happen (and what negatives are less likely to) (impact)?
3. What specifically is it that I am looking to change / accomplish? (specificity)
4. How will I know when I have changed? Specifically, what do I / others expect to observe? (specificity)
5. What might help / interfere with me as I try to make the changes needed (resources)
6. What will it “be like” when this (change) occurs (specificity)

A change / improvement goal should be clear and well-articulated before one begins to work on it, otherwise it just will not be actioned. This, in turn, may create a sense of “hopelessness” or a feeling that the person “cannot change”. Check that the goal has enough specificity so that it can be “remembered” easily in the “moment of choice”. An example of a goal that is not “specific” enough is “I

*want to be more happy”, “I want to earn a lot of money”, or “I want to be less emotional around others”. An example of a more specific goal might be “I want to become better at managing my own “sales call reluctance” with clients I predict to be resistant (improvement goal) so that I might to earn enough money over 5 years to buy a home spacious and comfortable home for my family, send my daughter to Harrow and take a trip around the world” (outcome). Then I will feel as if I have done something meaningful in my life (impact)!*

Further questioning will associate the goal with sensory anchors (what will an envisioned future look / feel / sound etc like, what will the client be doing, with whom, how might other be feeling and behaving etc) so that the goal likely to be remembered in those, key, “moments-of-choice”.

#### 4.1.1 Some Question Ideas for Specificity

- What is your goal, specifically?
- How will you know when you have it (or when you have made progress on the journey)?
- What will be the immediate evidence of progress?
  - A feeling? ○ Something you can see? ○ An outcome?
  - A measurable behavioural change or strengthened competency)?
- What will others be able to observe that is different?

#### 4.1.2 “Clean Language” for Specificity

Using “Clean language” (refer PROG model section) can be an efficient and effective way to elicit further specificity AND, importantly, to elicit an emotion, image or metaphor that can aid the Client’s recall in the moment. E.g., if a client says they would like to cultivate patience, you can try the response; “.... *so you would like to develop patience, and what’s that patience like...?*”. Or, you can play with such questions as... “*...patience ...and where is that patience...?*”.

Another advantage of a “clean” approach is that your questions are unencumbered by your own interpretations or metaphor.

Clean language patters to elicit specificity can include (where X is the “initial” statement of what a client wants, like, e.g., patience or confidence etc) ....

Be playful and try such questions as:

- And what kind of X is that X?
- And what else about (that) X?
- And that X is like what...?
- And where is (that) X?
- And is there anything else about (that) X? (or... “And what else about (that) X?”

## 4.2 [REMEMBER: THERE MUST ALWAYS ALSO BE A SPECIFIC, MEANINGFUL AND MEASURABLE “SESSION GOAL”]

The full SCRIP process tends to occur at the early stage of a coaching program when a client is working on what they would like as coaching goals / outcomes for the program as a whole. As the program proceeds the SCRIP questioning becomes less exhaustive and more of a “check-in” to whether the session goal is “in line” with the program goals. Session by session there may be differing goals which are subcomponents of the overall session goals.

It is important to ask, at the beginning of each session, such questions as

- And what would you wish to get from our session, or today? or...
- What would make this a good session for you?
- What is meaningful for you about this?
- How will you know that you have made progress?
- Etc... <leading to a session goal that is specific, measurable and meaningful>

*If the session goal is NOT in line with the program goal (which does happen) then a more exhaustive SCRIP questioning process MAY be appropriate. As coaches, we want to be sure that the client is actually working on that thing that is genuinely the most important thing for them. There is an element of judgment about this, the key being the coach’s assessment of the client’s commitment to a particular session goal and its relationship to desired longer-term goals and outcomes.*

## 4.3 CONTEXT

Meaning is usually defined by context. In broad terms, this is the when, where, how and with whom of the goal. The coach should have the Client talk about the various contexts that surround their goal.

There are 4 main kinds of contexts:

- Relational – with whom?
- Emotional – “when I am feeling xxx (emotion)”
- Situational – where / what? In which “role” that you play (or aspire to play) is this important?
- Time – when?

Describe the well-formed goal in the context that applies to it. This makes the goal even more specific and motivational as the image of attainment becomes better anchored. If possible, even at the Goal phase (in GROW coaching), have the learner add places, locations, geography, individuals or “groups” / titles and timeframes. Add questions from your knowledge of the important contexts of the client. In this way you are helping create an emotionally charged memory of a prediction which “sinks” into the mind, making it meaningful and more accessible in those key moments of choice.

Note that often contexts can be emotional and relational. For example, *“I would particularly like to be more patient with my staff when I feel frustrated due to poor performance on important projects”*. Or *“I want to be more confident when handling difficult situations in board meetings when I notice I am becoming anxious”*. Or... *“As a boss (“role”) I wish to practice expressing the value or “compassion” with my staff (“relational”) when I notice that I have become irritated (“emotional”) because they haven’t done what I wanted them to do (“situational”)”* ....

#### 4.3.1 Some Question Ideas

- In what situations / circumstances is this relevant (this question may elicit an answer which covers all or most of the relevant contexts (time, people, places and even emotional)? or...
- To what part of your life would you like this change to apply?
- At what time(s) do you wish this to occur?
- By when is this needed?
- With whom does this apply?
- Where is this relevant?
- What other contexts are relevant? (e.g., some people get snippy when they are hungry, stressed or when they haven’t had enough sleep – so think broadly about context).

## 4.4 RESOURCES

This is a quick reality check on the various resources available which will enable achievement of the goal. Do a quick check early on to ensure they have the Skills, Knowledge, Time, Mindsets, Relationships and other internal and external resources. As always, this would be an “integral exploration” of resource availability.

#### 4.4.1 Some Question Ideas (Integrally Informed)

##### Support

Such questions as:

- What values / beliefs do you hold which can support you (Q1)?
- What other mindsets can support you? (Q1)
- What skills / strengths / knowledge / experience can support you? (Q2)
- What environments / systems / structures / processes might support you in making this change? (Q3)
- Who might support you? How? (Q4)
- What social and cultural systems might support you? (Q4)
- How will you “activate” needed resources? (All)

##### Interference

- What values / beliefs that you hold might get in the way? How can you work with this? (Q1)
- What other mindsets might interfere? How can you work with these? (Q1)
- What skills / strengths / knowledge / experience are currently lacking <<WHAT ELSE>>? Where might you find these? (Q2)
- What environments / systems / structures / processes might enable / inhibit you in making this change <<WHAT ELSE>>? What can you “do” about this?
- How might others (who) get in the way? What can you do about this?
- What cultural, social or political systems / structures might get in the way of this?
- What are you learning about your situation / your goal / yourself as you reflect on this?

## 4.5 IMPACT

This area, which NLP practitioners call the “ecology” that surrounds the goal, is where you enquire about consequences for other areas of their life or the lives of others. A simple example might be the impact on family of a new job that requires travel or significant amounts of late work. Another example might be how something you need to do at work may impact on the beliefs or values, or where a necessary change of behaviour may create anxiety which might derail the goal. The idea is to have all parts of the person agree with the goal, with congruence between desires, values, and needs and an understanding of what might get in the way.

### 4.5.1 Some Question Ideas

- On a scale of 1-10, how important is this to you?
- How long have you been thinking about this?
- What’s happening now? or... What’s happening instead?
- What happens if there is no change (feelings, relationships etc)?
- How will making this change alter your experience of life?
- Is it worth what it might take make the change? <related to above>, or... What might you have to give up or “let go of” to do this? (think “hidden drivers / goals” – a very important question, often missed to the detriment of the client)
- What else will you gain? / What might you lose?
- What about others (gain or lose)
- What else will happen? / What won’t happen?
- What will / won’t happen if I don’t do this (self / others / else).
- What might others gain / lose?
- In what way is this meaningful for you?  
[Does the goal seem to be creating energy or “desire” for movement?]

## 4.6 POSSIBLE - UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE CLIENT?

A WFG is something that a person can actively do something about. Using Kegan's language, such a goal "implicates" the client.

Again, this may simply be a matter of skilful phrasing of the goal. E.g., if a stated goal is "*I want my direct reports to support me better*", then this, as stated, is not under the client's control. It's more of a desired outcome than a (coaching) goal. What is under direct control of the client is what they can specifically do to make this result more probable, e.g. "*I want to find ways to better coach, train and support my direct reports so that they are in a position to take on more responsibility*". One of the keys to this is to chunk larger "outcome" type goals into smaller goals whose steps are directly under the client's control. This can sometimes be done using a technique called "backward laddering" (asking, simply, "*what needs to happen so that that might happen*" or, "*and what can you do differently so that might happen*"?)

One thing to watch here is the "time" context. Clients have different relationships with time. Many want everything to happen tomorrow! Others realise that, over time, more events are potentially under their influence. Time is a resource often forgotten, especially by stressed and busy clients.

### 4.6.1 Some Question Ideas

- "Clean" backward laddering: What needs to happen so that that might happen? (keep asking the question until you get to a first step the client can take).
- What might you need to do differently so that might happen?
- What might be your role in this?
- What part of this is this is under your control or influence?
- How might you make this more likely?
- How might you influence this?
- What is a first step you can take which might lead to this?
- If you can do this, then what's been holding you back <this question points to both impact (see similar question under impact) and also points to the fact that there may be something else getting in the way (such as the goal not being under the client's sphere of possibility)>.

## 4.7 AN EXTRA P: MAKE IT POSITIVE

A positively stated goal can provide a beacon against we can calibrate our behavioural compass. Such goals are also conducive to positive, resourceful, creative and collaborative mind-states (known as "approach" or "reward" states). Negatively stated goals (goals articulated as "problems to get rid of") tend to encourage what is known as a "threat state" mindset. Such a state of mind inhibits creativity, collaboration and resourcefulness.



- Check goal is stated in positive terms – something wanted rather than something not wanted. “Moving towards something” rather than “moving away” from something.
- If the goal is stated negatively then try asking “how might you state that in positive terms” or “[I am hearing what you don't want) use this phrase only if you have excellent rapport with the client], what is it you do want (or want instead)?” OR ... use the “clean language” question: ....and when <problem>, what do you want to (have) happen?

## 4.8 FINAL QUESTIONS – WHERE THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD

The idea with this form of questioning is that the learner may realise that they are not prepared to give up that which is preventing them from making the changes they need to in order to be happier or more successful in their work or lives.

Challenge the Client by asking:

- “...and given what you have told me what changes would you like to make to your goal...”
- “...what is it that you would like to remember (bring back to mind) in future “moments of choice”, and....
- “...how might you remember this / these...”
- “...If you could remember these things in all key moments, would you make the necessary choices that lead to action in the direction of your goals?”

The final 3 questions often point towards new goals (for example, cultivation of such mental qualities of values as patience, presence, curiosity, acceptance etc).

## 4.9 FINAL “SUMMARISATION” OF THE GOAL

Finally, see if the client is able to articulate the goal as a sentence or two that incorporates what they want together with what happens when the “get” it... e.g., *“I want to learn to allow others, where appropriate, to fully express themselves without interruption as part of becoming a more empowering leader”*.

Remember, it isn't language that moves us to action, it is emotion. The goal of the WFG process is to define the goal in such a way as to help the client bring back the feelings they had at the point of “setting” the goal. In this way, they are more likely to take the require next first step.