Family Goal Setting

The start of a New Year has always been a good time to think about what is ahead, and more importantly, what direction you want to take.

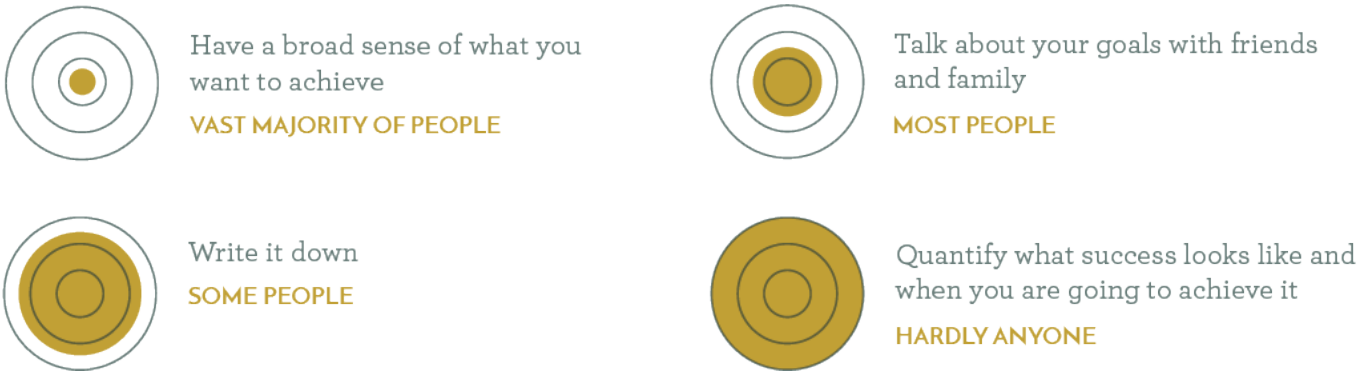
In our family, we've always shared New Year's resolutions. At least, my mother would pressure us into having some and, subtly or not so subtly, suggest what they might be: 'tidier', 'more helpful' or 'more independent', perhaps.

What is your view on setting goals?

We're not talking about the professional goals you quickly write (or copy from last year) into your annual performance review. We're talking about your personal goals; the dreams you want to make a reality, like the person plotting the review of their new business idea.

- I'm going to train twice a week so that I can compete in the September half-marathon.
- I will dedicate two nights a month to connect one-on-one with my closest friends.

The actions that set apart people who set goals effectively and those who only manage to talk about their goals in vague terms are actually quite minimal.



How many people do you know who do all four of these things?

They sit down and write what they are going to achieve and when, they can articulate what success looks like, they quantify it and, either before or after they have done so, they discuss it with the people closest to them for feedback and support. I'm betting you don't know that many.

The amount of work to get from the thing we pretty much all do – chat to the people around us about where we are going and what we want to achieve – is minimal, but when we have to put our minds to it and write our goals down, the drop-off is phenomenal. Why is this?

Let's start by considering the question our 3-year-old daughter asks us when proposing we go to the park: 'Does that sound like fun?'

No, it would be a big stretch to call goal-setting fun. There's probably no better way to kill the buzz of the New Year than being forced to get specific on the flash of inspiration you had on your morning swim, or worse, unpacking those ideas you've been threatening to do for a long time. It can be unsettling to push yourself to articulate how you will truly achieve something, even though this process will bring you closer to it.

We make ourselves immediately unpopular with the families we work with, because we get them to do all of these steps. Even worse, we get them to keep working the goals based on feedback from their family and then we get them to come back to the goals they set, to see what lessons they can learn.

As outsiders, we have an advantage that allows us to be so dogmatic. In our podcast series, we interviewed a family that had been through our goal-setting process. The adult children spelled out the difference between the well-intentioned advice of a family member and non-family guidance quite succinctly:

> *'It's good to have someone who's not family, who can make you feel accountable for stuff. You know, when I say I'm going to do something, and I don't, and you can pull me up on it, that's really good. But if that was one of my parents, it might not be received so well.'*

That final point might have been an understatement. One of the main reasons we hesitate when sharing our hopes and dreams with our families is that family doesn't have to reach very far to find a couple of lines that can, to put it nicely, ground us. After all, they have so many examples of where we didn't follow through on our commitments. All parents have numerous examples of their children's lost goals – whether it's an abandoned hobby or a neglected pet.

We don't have to look very far then to see why we don't work our goals through

properly, let alone in a family context. It can be an unenjoyable process; it will certainly unsettle us and can quickly create conflict.

Leaving this aside, for those who push past these challenges, the rewards are significant. It's something we explored with our interviewees:

> *'I feel like I may be closer to working out what's possible for myself, and what I can actually achieve, especially with the support and help and the skill sets of people around me. By constantly sharing and updating the kinds of dreams and goals in a shared conversation, I feel like I am closer to developing what I actually want my dreams to be.'*

Let's just pause on that last line: 'I'm closer to developing what I actually want my dreams to be.' That is an astounding achievement.

What we might usually expect to hear in the benefits column are things like 'I achieved what I set out to' or 'I wrote down what I wanted to achieve and 12 months later it happened'. But this isn't 'The Secret'. Our lives are infinitely more complex and non-linear.

What this shows is that repetitive goal setting forces you to work out what you want. You might not get it right the first time, but as you take the time to re-visit the goals, you have to refine what feels right. After sitting down with five people to review your business plan, when you get into the details of what is required, are you more passionate about that venture; that path you set for yourself?

You can start to achieve this if you revisit your goals regularly by yourself. However, the process of articulating and sharing your goals is the critical step in keeping yourself honest. The reason family is such a liability is the same reason it is such an asset. We know our families will call us out on something that doesn't sound like an authentic goal. They uncover what's new really quickly. Unsurprisingly, this was a topic of conversation that was well-articulated by the family:

> *'To actually sit there in a workshop with a group of people who understand where you're coming from with those goals is really useful. It's really valuable to have the family's advice and help.'*

The final part here is critical. Having the family share in goal setting makes it is easier to understand where the family resources can be useful.

The holidays can be a challenging time of year in our house. Like many, we constantly play the game of whether we should tell each other what we want to receive. It's the balance between ensuring we get what we want, and the magic of picking the right thing. For a small gift, this isn't a big deal. For a family considering how to use its resources to help its members achieve their goals, it is far more significant. You need to know exactly what people want to achieve and how they want to get there before you can think about how you can help.

Let's assume the business plan is refined, the experiment is a success and the new venture needs significant resources to be successful. It would be easy for family members to jump in with the capital. But what if the individual had a new goal, to understand in a very real, practical way, how venture capital works. A gift of directly funding the project would actually be an impediment. We only find these things out when we ask the right questions and get a deeper understanding of each other's ambitions.

This brings us to the final point. By exploring goals with your family, it is much easier to see how you can put your non-financial resources to use; a phone call once a week to keep someone accountable, coaching on how to sail, an audience for a dry-run of a public speaking engagement. These gifts are much easier to identify when we share our goals. They can become the most powerful gifts, creating long-lasting experiences and the potential to bring family members closer together.

Successful goal setting is dependent on a safe environment that encourages people to share – something to consider as your family contemplates its New Year's resolutions.