

These 5 Killer Questions Can Help Set Goals People Will Actually Care About

As leaders we can set goals that fall flat, getting compliance but not commitment. Here's how to encourage the latter.



When I was a young employee, I remember a discussion with a former boss about our business goals. I asked for clarity on what they were. He told me they were to a) hit our target of 10 percent profit growth, and b) get him promoted.

If he was as cool a dude as my man-crush Justin Timberlake, then maybe I could get a little excited about achieving that second goal (in hopes of getting asked to hang out). Maybe.

Frankly, the first goal wasn't that inspiring either. Herein lies the problem. Too many goal-setters set goals that yield ho-hum instead of gung-ho.

If you're a goal-setter in your organization and you want people to care about those goals more than they do about the ten-page terms and conditions of their cell phone plan, there's hope.

Here are five killer questions you should ask yourself before you deploy any goal:

1. What's in it for them?

Start simple and picture your employees receiving the goal you're about to deploy.

Why should they be excited? How will they benefit? The answer to this question will not only help you shape the goal itself, but the language you use as you share it.

This question helps you make it about them, not you. It helps ensure that the goal doesn't feel like it's for "the man", but for the many who want something worthy to work for.

2. Will achieving the goal create pride upon reflection?

Pride is a great measure of a goal. For a goal to induce pride it has to be relevant, challenging, and ultimately achievable.

Here's a trick I use to help keep me honest on this front.

When I set a goal, I ask if it will bring people out of their **comfort zone but shy of the danger zone, while holding up to the twilight zone.**

By this last part I mean: When my people are in the twilight of their career and reflecting back on their time in my shop, will those goals, presumably realized, stand up as memorable and pride-worthy?

Try this little test to set your own pride-inducing goals.

3. How will this goal connect with them personally and emotionally?

The goal has to have intrinsic, not just extrinsic, value.

Theresa Amabile and Steven Kramer of Harvard Business School share a good example of the difference between the two.

They cite Google's inspiring stated mission to **"organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful" and contrast it to the stated goal of a chemicals company, which is to "yield a minimum of \$100 million in revenue annually within 5 years".**

Which one might you actually give a hoot about? No contest.

Like Google, you too can set goals that actually register a pulse.

4. How might accomplishment of the goal help them to grow?

Scholars have long held that when we see ourselves learning and growing, it creates an increased sense of competence, which in turn provides a great sense of meaning in our work.

Accomplishment of the right goal provides the perfect meaning-filled playground.

5. Have they weighed in on it?

You know the deal. People can't buy in until they weigh in.

Co-design the goals by having a "What Does Great Look Like?" session with your employees. Give them a chance to express what kind of goal would be inspiring to them.

Harvard University Professor Srikant M. Datar suggests: ***"Ask your employee to draft goals that directly contribute to the organization's mission."***

So try these five questions to set goals that will ring the bell.

And let Mr. Timberlake know I'll bring the nachos if he wants to chill and watch Monday Night Football.