Don't have goals

Don't have goals. Actually use them (or don't bother)

It's clear that the reasons for using goals (we've chosen the word 'using' deliberately) are to get benefits in motivation. Goals are a motivational tool. From the science of performance psychology the four main benefits are quite distinct and easily remembered:

1. A goal gives you a sense of direction
2. Having a goal tells you how hard you need to work and how much effort is needed to get there or achieve it
3. The goal helps you overcome obstacles and be persistent in the face of hurdles
4. Finally, if the goal is challenging, it encourages you to innovate, change things and learn

If you're using goals to get one or more of these benefits then you're using goals effectively as a motivational tool i.e. to enhance motivation. Great, well done to you. That's the point of using them, to improve and maintain motivation and performance. Most people would go on to consider 'goal reviewing' to be part of using goals effectively but in practice very few bother to do so and even amongst the small number that do, only a few review the right thing. Given the proven benefits to motivation of using goals, when you come to review goals, it doesn't make sense to review how far you've got against achieving the goal! It makes much, much more sense to review how much is the goal still relevant in providing one or more of the above benefits. i.e. is the goal still building and maintaining motivation? A much more helpful review question than simply asking "how far have we got and how far have we got to go?" is to ask "how much further do we think we can get by when?".

Goal setting implies a static one off task. Reviewing goals does too. Using goals is much more active terminology, like you'd use a tool (you wouldn't buy a tool and then simply keep checking if it's there without any intention of ever using it, or worse still, forgetting that you bought it. Or, even worse again, buying a tool and then complaining that it doesn't work when you're trying to use it for a job it wasn't designed for – ever tried banging in nails with a saw?). Using goals and using them to grow and maintain motivation are much more relevant things to talk about.

If businesses reviewed the continued motivational usefulness of their goals rather than just progress against them, for many this would be a paradigm shift. In plain English, it would transform things in a good way for every stakeholder in the business. So, if you're going better than expected and the goal is no longer helping you to overcome obstacles, the goal gets shifted higher. If things are not going so well, and the amount of effort needed to achieve it is impossible without Superman strength, the goal gets adjusted accordingly so that the goal always feels relevant. If the strategic destination has changed and your goal is no longer providing a meaningful sense of direction, then you set a more meaningful goal. This wouldn't take any more time than the current internal industry of becoming ever more expert at explaining and presenting variance to the financial forecast.

A goal shouldn't be fixed according to the original ideas behind it... the meaning of the phrase 'goal setting' has been changed so much that it in itself might be a barrier. People might raise their eyes skywards at the thought of a goal setting session, rather than being excited by the possibilities.

A useful strategic or tactical performance review would promote regular evaluation of some very simple things:

- The end game – are we clear on it and is it still relevant to us?
- The current attitude towards the end game – do we find it motivational and want to get there?
- The effort level needed to reach end game – do we have a feel for how hard we're going to have to work?
- The level of confidence that we will persist – is it meaningful enough for us so we really want to work hard towards our goal?
- The quality of intelligence being fed forward as a result of our goal – what is our goal teaching us?

If these things aren't happening, then you might be best off not setting goals in the first place. What!? Working without goals?? Why not? Most people are working without meaningful goals for most of the year anyway because they're working towards goals that were set at the start of the year and which at some point have become meaningless apart from the fact that the only personal meaning they have, maybe ever had, is that they were, and remain, linked to pay.

And if they were set in the first place as a mechanism for deciding the level of performance and pay then you're confusing performance with results and not getting any of the four benefits listed earlier. If you are going to use goals you're much better off continuously modifying them to make sure they remain continuously motivational and find a much better way of evaluating performance.