

# Why SMART Goals Don't Work

(and how *using* goals is more effective)



PlanetK2

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# Why SMART Goals Don't Work

Whenever people talk about setting goals, it doesn't take long for the SMART acronym to enter the conversation, devoutly cited as the way to set goals. But here's the thing: SMART goals are far from smart when it comes to creating a relationship with goals that keeps your motivation levels the primary focus of the goals. The irony?

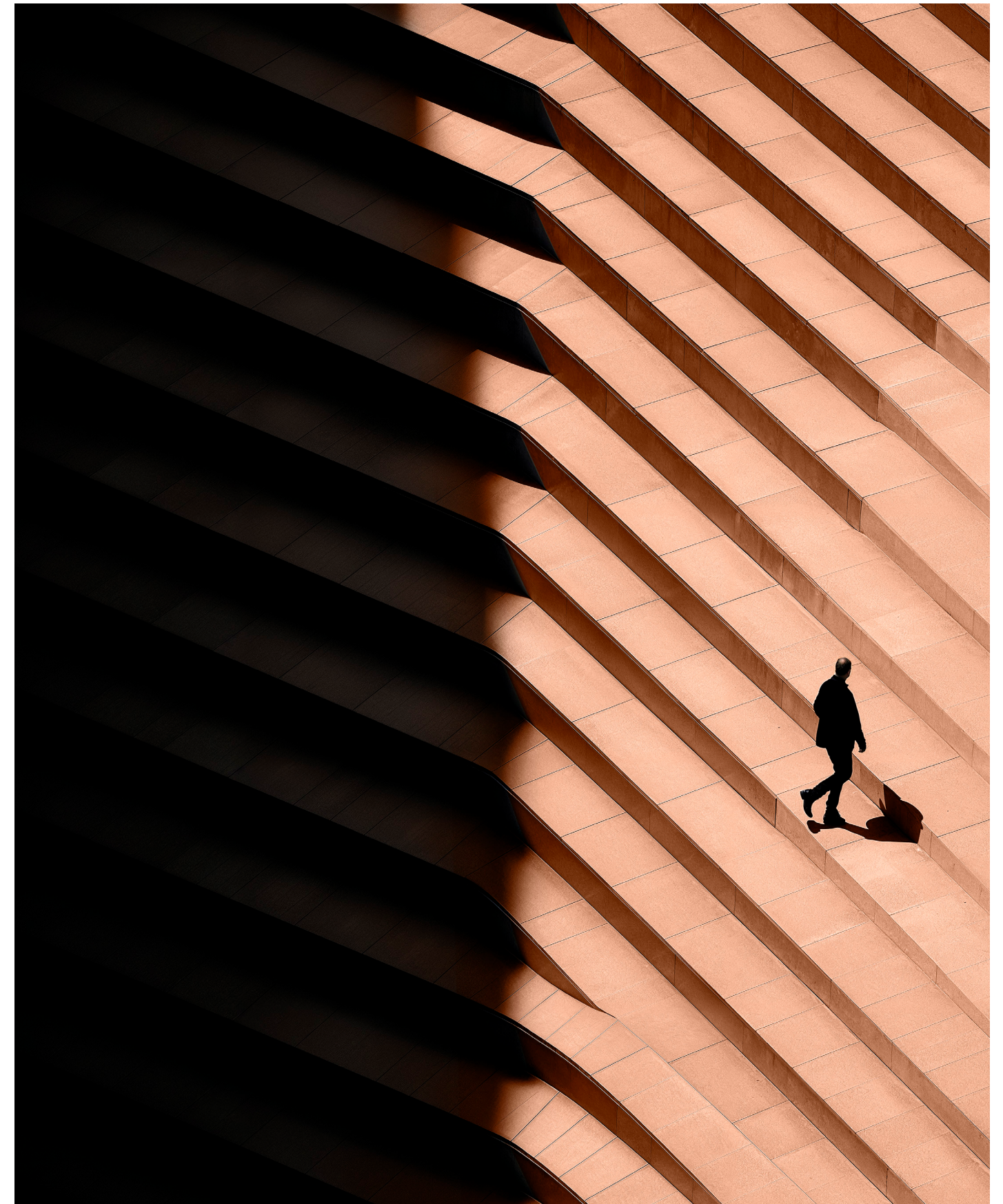
Goal setting was originally designed to enhance motivation, yet SMART goals often end up setting you up to have a system that creates fragile motivation from the outset. "Using goals" is a much better way of looking at your approach to goals, rather than just "setting goals". The main issue with SMART goals is that they place all the emphasis on setting the goal itself, often leading to goals that inadvertently set you up for failure, leaving your motivation compromised from the very start.

Focusing on using goals is far more effective than simply setting them, as the emphasis shifts to regularly engaging with the goals and keeping them present in your mind.

Shifting the emphasis to using goals also prompts a more practical question: how can goals be set with action and application in mind? When we approach goals as something to use rather than to just set, we reframe goals as tools to guide action, rather than singular end points to be reached. For goals to really work properly for us, it makes a real difference when we understand how to build and maintain high-quality motivation through what we think about and focus on. The most effective goals you can set will:

1. Enhance your sense of choice and control.
2. Build confidence that you're capable of achieving the end goal.
3. Create a sense of connection and belonging with others who are helping you or you're on the mission with.

With number three in mind specifically, SMART goals rarely focus on collaboration, which misses the opportunity to ensure goals don't feel like a solo chore.





## Goals are tools meant to be actively used, not simply set with the expectation that they'll work on their own without your involvement.

Add to this the fact that SMART goals often focus solely on setting the goal, rather than encouraging ongoing engagement to continuously refine, learn from, and adapt your approach for sustained progress, you see that the opportunity to intentionally build confidence along the way is missed. SMART goals tend to focus on end-point arrival only, which is all about the future, so you usually don't feel that in control of the goal until you near completion.

With a little interrogation, you quickly see that although well intended, the approach leaves more questions than answers when it comes to everyone understanding exactly how the SMART approach ultimately helps you actively

work the path to success effectively.

As we've already mentioned, goals are tools meant to be actively used, not simply set with the expectation that they'll work on their own without your involvement.

If you set an expectation from the outset to continuously engage with the goal (using it as a tool) and recognise that its true value lies in consistently applying and updating the knowledge you gain along the way, you're not only significantly increasing your chances of achieving it but also ensuring the journey is valuable - even if you don't ultimately reach the exact endgoal you originally aimed for.

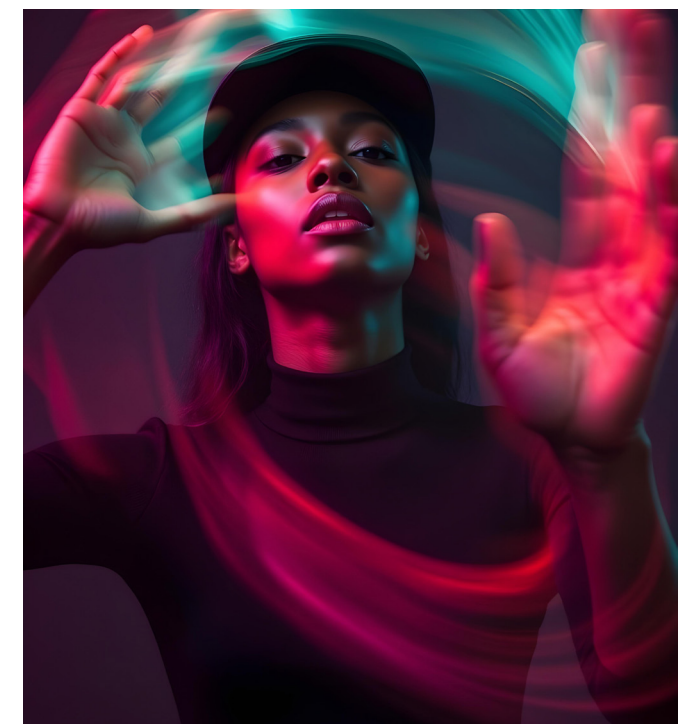
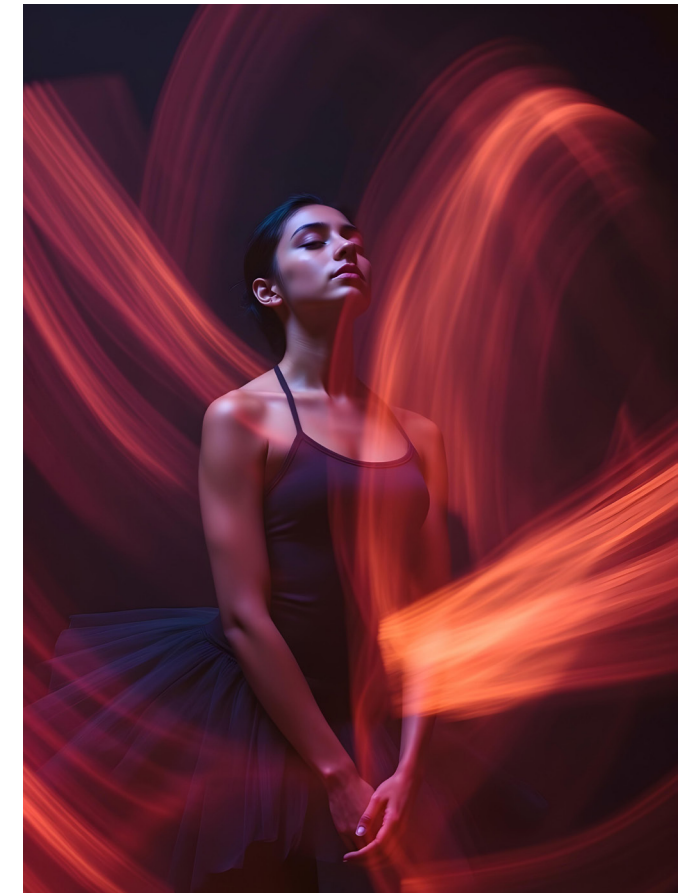
A few years ago, Professor Christian Swann's introduction of Open Goals offered a far more effective framework for building a relationship with goals - one that fuels motivation and increases the likelihood of sustained effort and success. The key focus of Open Goals is on learning and growth. With Open Goals, the aim is to build and learn in order to keep the behaviour moving forward.

This approach is so much more effective than simply requiring you to 'not stop trying'! Right from the start, Open Goals encourage a mindset of curiosity and discovery. Beyond that, they create an expectation that pursuing a goal is about building confidence - knowing that every attempt made is laying the foundation for future attempts and success. I'd highly recommend reading more about Open Goals and seeing how they might transform your levels of goal achievement and enjoyment along the way!

Most goal setting approaches don't encourage goals that truly give you something to hold on to in the day to day efforts to make them happen. Instead, goals are typically recommended to be set like:

1. By the end of January, I will have written 2 chapters of my book.
2. By the end of the year, I will have increased my best sales result by 10%.
3. By halfway through the year, I will have secured a promotion.

These are fine. But, as Roy Kent so eloquently said in Ted Lasso, "Don't you dare settle for fine."



*“Goals are more useful if they provide you with an ambition for the experience along the way.”*

Goals are more useful if they provide you with an ambition for the experience along the way, rather than simply the end result. Compare those earlier examples to these:

- 1. By the end of January, I'm aiming to write two chapters of my new book and having experimented with my style so I'm more sure of my voice.
- 2. By the end of the year I want to have a reputation for creative and disciplined sales performance, resulting in a

healthier pipeline, more enjoyment, greater focus on value and a new personal best overall result.

3. By half way through the year, I'll have shown my ability to work at the next level up by showing increased subject matter knowledge, demonstrating my ability to handle more complex work and will be leading a key project to completion.

You can see the goals above have more of a blend of WHAT

and HOW in them. This instantly gives you more of a chance of being able to act with specific intention today, rather than just thinking that today is another day to be ticked off before the deadline you set yourself. There's lots of different approaches you can take with setting the "right" kind of goals, but I'm never really fully sure any give the full picture needed to make the goals useful and usable. I'm currently experimenting with an approach that asks WHAT once and HOW twice. WHAT

outcome would you like to achieve (and by when if that's important), and is there a specific finish line/state you want to get to? HOW would you go about achieving the WHAT? (Write a to-do list or step by step instructions that will lead to successful completion.) HOW do you need to be performing each step to ensure that it's done to the right level? (Write a specific coaching prompt that highlights HOW a step is executed to the level required.)



When you take the time to describe the WHAT and HOW of your goal, supported by some of the qualitative ingredients you would like to be true, you have far more opportunity to translate a goal into a daily aim.

It invites the conversation with yourself of, “if that’s my goal for the month, what specific opportunity do I have to make some progress today and how should I go about it?” A daily stepping stone that feels really connected to achieving the end goal will do a great job of increasing your sense of control and confidence, one day at a time; once again, priming motivation along the way.

To ensure your goals stay relevant as you make the day-to-day efforts, you need to regularly review the “so what, so far?” rather than simply waiting until the finish line to assess how well you achieved the goal.

Goals that don’t get adapted and updated along the way are likely to demotivate, because you can be left with the sense that the goal seems less and less likely every day. Circumstances change, capability changes and energy

changes, so making goals time-sensitive and responsive to evolving conditions or progress rates, ensures you’re working with them in a way that maximises their value.

When you know you can play with the outcome and performance elements of the goal, updating them as you learn from each attempt to make progress, you begin to benefit from a feedforward mindset, using new knowledge to refine your WHAT and HOW into an increasingly helpful blend. It’s all about being able to focus on the right action to take, one effort at a time, in the pursuit of the end game that you still want to be true.

So, what’s your plan to keep referring to your goals?

What’s your plan to set a goal for today that reflects a commitment to the broader aim you’ve set yourself?

What’s your plan for assessing satisfaction levels with the progress you’ve made so far, so you can feedforward any learning with the next mini goals you set for today or this week?



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