



Transform 2013 by Turning Goals into Questions

Transitions are ideal times to create multi-faceted change in our lives. Moving across four different countries and three different continents during the past seven years has made that truth crystal clear for my family. The start of a new year can give equal cause for recalibrating a life. Many of us have set a few goals during the past couple of weeks, and a few of us have set many goals. But we all know that goals set are not necessarily goals met. At best 20 percent of us will succeed at achieving our objectives. To buck those odds, try this trick: Set a question goal instead of a statement goal.

Have you ever been in a meeting where a group was asked “What challenges do you face at (fill in the blank)?” The “blank” could be filled in by “leading others,” “leading yourself,” “changing your company’s culture,” and the list goes on. At the beginning of executive workshops conducted around the world, I often ask that kind of question to get a better sense of the problem-terrain people are traversing. Small groups spend 7-10 minutes defining the top 2-3 challenges they face. (You might even take a moment right now to do the same.) Then they present their list of top challenges to the rest of the participants. Funny thing is that most challenges are problems “out there,” not “in here.” What I mean is that problems are often framed as a “system issue,” a “top management issue,” a “supplier issue,” or a “direct report issue.” Rarely are they framed as an “I’m part of the problem” issue.

But when you push a group to take their top three challenge statements and translate them into concrete questions, it often refines their understanding of what the problem really is. Initially, groups think this simple request will be easy to do, but it usually takes longer than expected. The mere act of changing a statement-based challenge into a question-based goal puts a much sharper focus on the issue at hand. Here are a few examples to illustrate what this dynamic looks like (they come from a couple of teams that I recently worked with):

Fundamentally, I’ve discovered that turning a challenge statement into a challenge question consistently turns the finger of responsibility away from others and back to ourselves. Someone “out there” is no longer responsible for solving the problem. Instead, someone “in here,” me, is responsible for making change happen. Almost always when debriefing this goal-to-question exercise, several insights surface about how the

mere act of translation ratchets up a sense of personal responsibility for identifying and implementing a solution to a problem.

Bottom line, one way to make 2013 better than 2012 is to take all those goals that you’ve just set and transform them into questions. You just might be surprised at the quizzical magic of aspirations turning into accomplishments.

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