
To Accomplish Difficult Tasks, Combine Discipline With Cheating



By Nirmalya Kumar , Distinguished Fellow, INSEAD Emerging Markets Institute

Setting stretch goals that incorporate wiggle room is the best way to ensure actual results.

Some of you may have read the [recent study](#) that tracked people in Pittsburgh on a weight-loss program. Half the participants were randomly given a fitness tracker, while the other half were asked to record their habits on a website every night. The surprising result was that over a period of two years, the group with fitness trackers lost 8 pounds. (3.6 kg) on average while the self-reporting group lost 13 pounds (5.9 kg).

According to the researchers, seeing exactly how much you've exercised via a tracker can actually impede your progress by providing undisputable evidence either of "good behaviour" that could be used to justify overindulgence in food, or of a discouraging failure to stick to the health regimen.

The problem in achieving difficult, long-term goals, such as saving money for retirement or losing weight, is that in order to do so most people set short-term, intermediate goals. These goals could include saving a certain amount

of money each year or going to the gym every day of the week. When these people do fail in their short-term objectives, they tend to abandon the entire project, much to their and society's detriment.

“Emergency reserve” goals

Recent **research** co-written by Marissa Sharif, a doctoral candidate at the University of California, Los Angeles, demonstrates, intriguingly I believe, that people prefer goals that give them some flexibility in ‘cheating’ to similar goals that are either easy or hard. And they are more likely to persist with limited flexibility goals.

Sharif tested, in the laboratory and through field research, whether giving people an ‘emergency reserve’ – a predefined amount of slack for emergencies – led to better results. For example, a goal with an emergency reserve could be to go to the gym seven days of the week with two emergency skip days (or 500 emergency calories in a weekly diet). Such a goal does better in terms of consumer preference and persistence than the easy goal of going to the gym five days a week, or the hard goal of going to the gym all seven days of the week.

Sharif argues that setting more ambitious goals (seven days a week) yet letting people off the hook (two skip days) in an emergency provides the best of both worlds. The goal remains attainable while still stretching people and effectively putting a cost on using the reserve.

The ‘emergency reserve’ labelling makes a person feel guilty about using it and, hence, he or she will resist dipping into it unless necessary.

Cut yourself - and others - some slack

This brings me back to the fitness tracker study. I think we are over-monitoring our children and employees simply because technology gives us the ability to do so. Rather than being soft or tough on them through easy and hard goals, we should cut them some slack while setting ambitious goals. It also led me to wonder if one could not use this recommendation in organisational settings such as the annual budgeting process.

One reason this research struck a chord with me is that I have repeatedly tried to go to the gym each day and failed. As a result, this year I adopted the goal of being in the gym for 183 days. Using one of those physical paper

diaries that one is still presented with in India at the beginning of the year, I just make a note against each day – with a pen and with minimal details – about whether I have been to the gym.

It takes all of ten seconds to do this, which led to some derision by friends who told me I should buy the Apple iWatch or a Fitbit and enter the 21st century. But this straightforward method of physically making a note, combined with the slack, has kept me on track so far this year. Despite a tight travel schedule and many pressing engagements, I try to get to the 15 days for the month as early as possible during the period.

The message? Give people ambitious goals – but allow them to cheat a little. Oh, and cut yourself some slack, too.

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