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The Beautiful Game

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There is something refreshing about a New Year. Now that the holiday gifts are unwrapped and the parties are a distant memory, our thoughts naturally turn to what we want to achieve in year ahead. For me, that usually means getting to the gym more often, calling my family every weekend and eating more veggies. When we set these goals, we really think we can deliver. Yet when reality hits, it's snowing outside and someone brings in leftover chocolates to work, how long does this last? Maybe a week if I am lucky. What causes us to lose the momentum to keep our goals and resolutions, and how does this relate to management and leadership?



One thing is for sure: if we don't ever set goals, we can't ever hope to achieve them! Abraham Lincoln once said, "A goal properly set is halfway reached." There is something important about the process of considering what needs to be done and planning how to get there. I have heard it said that the difference between a goal and a dream is the piece of paper on which you write it down. Planning is key.

Taking this idea further, it seems that the reason most people never achieve their goals is that the goals are so vague that they don't lead to any real outcomes. Look at my own above: "get to the gym more often," "eat more veggies." How more vague could they possibly be? Likewise, leaders and managers who say "do your best" are much less likely to have employees who perform well than those who set specific and observable goals.

If you are familiar with the "beautiful game," (soccer) then you will know that for 90 minutes eleven members on each team run around chasing a ball, aiming to shoot it into the goal. They have a specific purpose and they all know what it is. Some players are defenders, seeking to stop the other team from scoring, while others are midfielders, whose role it is to create goal opportunities. Some are forwards, who have the task of actually putting the ball in the net. They have a set time in which to achieve this. They have encouragement and feedback along the way from the team manager (albeit on the sidelines). They train for it. When the team finally scores, everyone cheers and celebrates....and then they strive for another goal.

As leaders, there is a lot we can learn from this analogy. For example, do our employees know what their purpose is? Do they know what we expect of them? Do we think of ourselves as the midfielders, willing to run to any part of the field to provide the opportunities (environment) to allow our employees to reach their goals, and to stop the opponents (obstacles) from getting in the way? Do we celebrate the achievement of goals?

Much of the research shows that employees whose managers set specific goals perform better and work harder to reach them. In the words of T.S. Eliot, "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go."

While we are contemplating our own personal New Year's resolutions, make it your goal as a leader to ensure your team will score this year. Ready to play?

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