



Ideaspark podcast on Goalsetting

Hullo, my name is Priya Hunt, and I am an executive coach whose mission is to inspire leaders like you to thrive and create a bigger impact. This is a short podcast to spark some ideas in you about a topic related to executive coaching and leadership. I will be telling you a story, sharing some science behind the story and a few practical suggestions for you to use. So, get your pen and paper out and let's begin. Today's topic is goal-setting.

And to illustrate this, I have chosen a story from the Indian epic, Mahabharata. This is the story of Ekalavya, a tribal prince, who set himself the goal of mastering archery. He wanted to learn from the great Guru Dronacharya, who was dedicated to teaching the princes of Hastinapura. Guru Drona refused to teach him – his knowledge was meant for royalty and not this poor tribal boy. But Ekalavya was far from dissuaded. He built a statue of Drona and methodically learnt and practiced archery consistently, becoming better and better at it. He had the fire in his belly to achieve this goal and the discipline to work hard on it and succeeded in becoming an exceptional archer. One day when Guru Drona and his royal students came across Ekalavya, they realised that he was indeed more skilled than all of them. This troubled Drona as he wanted his favourite student, Prince Arjuna to be the best archer of his time. He asked Ekalavya who he learnt this skill from and was surprised when his own name was given to him. Drona then did the unthinkable – he asked for Guru Dakshina. Those days, this was the offering or gift given to Gurus with utmost respect, in return for their teaching. He asked for Ekalavya's right thumb. Without hesitation, Ekalavya gave his right thumb to his Guru although he knew that this meant his archery would be compromised. Ekalavya was never able to shoot at the same level, but he continued to be an excellent archer, practicing even without his right thumb.

There are three points that I'd like to pick from this story and look at some of the science behind it.

1. Ekalavya set himself an unachievable, laughable goal. But it was specific, he wanted to master archery and it was hard. Locke & Latham, in their review of the advancements in goal-setting theory talk about how specific and high/hard goals equate to higher performance than easy and vague goals. Performance is a function of motivation and ability. So, whilst setting goals, it's worth reviewing if you are clear enough about it, fired up enough about it and it is challenging enough for you to strive hard for it
2. Ekalavya then put in the process and discipline needed to attain this goal. He created the habit of practicing. In his book the "Outliers," Malcolm Gladwell explains how people at the

peak of their profession often have at least 10,000 hours of practice behind them. There is science and research that shows how creating the right habits makes it easier to develop the discipline of practice. In his excellent book, “The chimp paradox,” Professor Steve Peters talks about how you can programme good habits into your brain’s computer, which then becomes automatic, just like brushing teeth.

3. The third element of the story that I want to flag is how Ekalavya is oriented towards mastery rather than his relative performance. By focussing on his own mastery of archery, all the effort becomes integral to the goal and failure becomes a learning opportunity rather than an issue. If, on the other hand, the focus is being better than others, as with Arjuna in this case, then failure can be attributed to external causes and leads to avoidance and negativity rather than learning. Having said that, there is sufficient research to show how complex motivations can be – so the point I am trying to make here is to be clear in your own mind on “why” that goal matters to you is paramount. It is this mastery-focus that may have enabled Ekalavya to hand over his right thumb to his Guru, without any hesitation. (I am certainly not advocating this form of Guru Dakshina by the way – but it is a reflection on Guru Dronacharya in this case).

Now let’s come to practical tips. I am sharing three practical tips that I am taking away by delving into the science behind this ancient story:

1. Set yourself challenging and meaningful goals. Spend some time questioning whether that is really what you want and understanding “why” you want it. One way to test it is to start observing the feelings in your body when you articulate this goal to yourself. Do you feel excitement, is it in your heart? Your stomach? If you are not feeling anything, why do you want to pursue this goal, challenge yourself. Another point is to keep this positive - so make the goal approach oriented (i.e., towards something) rather than avoidance oriented.
2. Identify a plan and path to get there. What habits do you need to programme in yourself to attain the goal? When doing this, I normally take a leaf out to the Japanese Kaizen philosophy of making it a noticeably short (even 1-minute) practice. By making it effortless to practice, you increase the chances of doing it consistently and that helps in programming it in a disciplined way into your brains
3. Finally, focus on the process rather than the outcome. Things happen, life happens, you feel unmotivated on some days. When that’s happening, it is almost easier to focus on the process (here’s where the 1-minute kaizen comes to life) rather than worry about the outcome.

What are the tips that you are taking away from this story? Do share in comments as I would love to know. Good luck with setting and achieving your goals, whatever they may be.



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References and further reading

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