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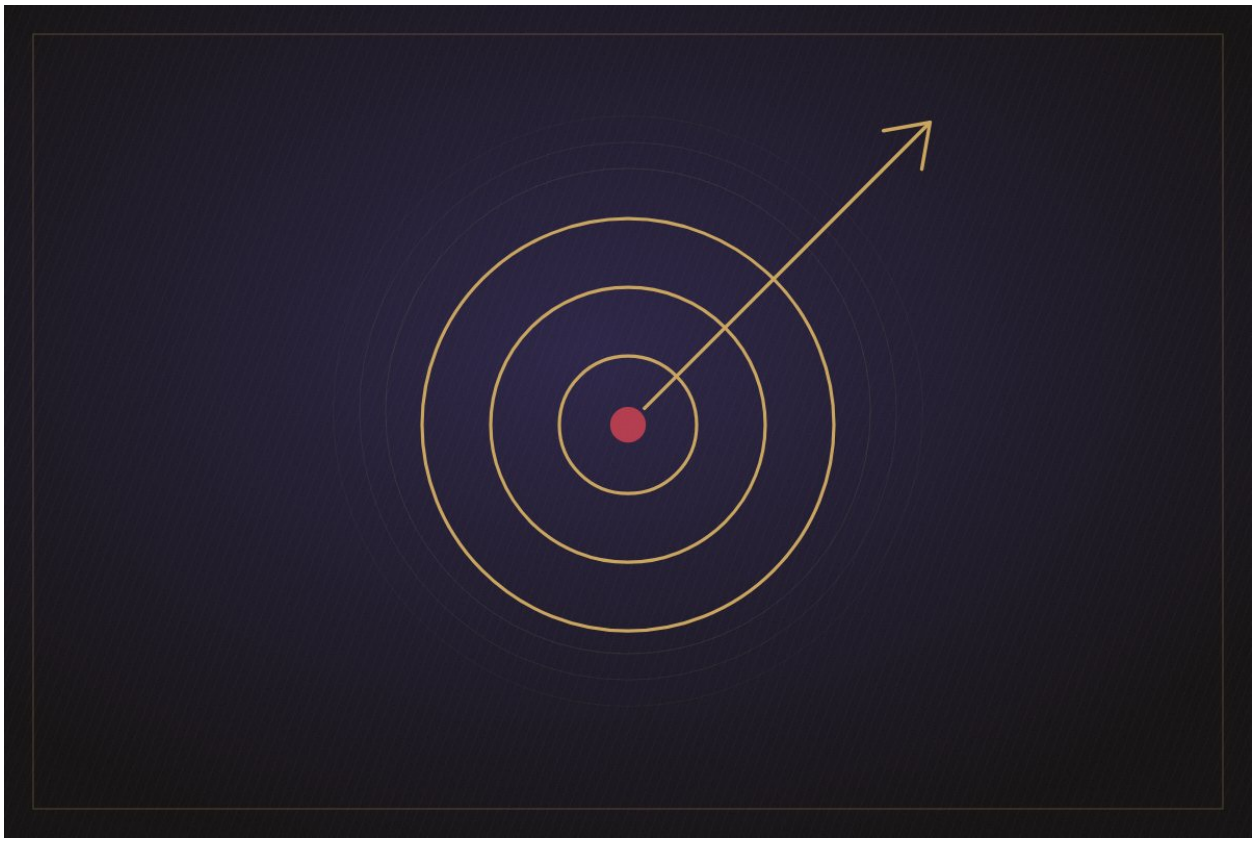
Mind

“Do your best” is not enough: what goal-setting theory says

Edwin Locke, Gary Latham and 35 years of research: why specific, challenging goals lead to better results

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Many books on "manifesting" say that it is enough to want something strongly and imagine it. Psychological research offers a more concrete path to turning a wish into reality: transform it into a clear goal, and pursue it with regular feedback.

Locke and Latham's theory

The psychologists Edwin Locke and Gary Latham studied this question for more than three decades, in laboratories, factories, offices and schools. In 2002 they summed up the main findings of their theory:

- **Specific and challenging goals** lead to higher performance than easy goals or the general advice "do your best".
- **Commitment matters.** A goal works when we consider it important and believe we can reach it.
- **Feedback is essential.** Without knowing where we are, we cannot adjust.
- **Task complexity has an effect.** For new and complicated tasks, learning goals ("learn three new strategies") often work better than outcome goals.

Why they work

According to Locke and Latham, a clear goal does four things: it directs attention to what matters, increases effort, lengthens persistence and pushes us to look for new strategies when the old ones do not work. "Do your best" does none of these as strongly, because it has no clear limit.

> *A wish shows the direction. A clear goal shows the next step.*

When goals harm

Other researchers have warned that goals can also have a dark side. When they are too narrow, they can make us ignore other important things. When they are too high, they can push towards unnecessary risks or even towards cheating. And when they are imposed from outside, without meaning for us, they lose their force.

How to frame a goal

1. **Make it specific:** not "read more", but "read 20 pages a day, five days a week".
2. **Make it challenging but possible:** something that requires effort but that you see as achievable.
3. **Set a deadline** and some checkpoints along the way.
4. **Measure and record progress** every week.
5. **For something completely new, start with a learning goal**, not with a final result.

Sources

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