Can coaching ever be free from the "tyranny" of goals?

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Abstract

This article calls for a re-examination of the dominant practice of goal setting in coaching. In setting out some common assumptions about goals it explores why many of those assumptions may be erroneous or misleading. It offers a critique of why goals, particularly performance goals, are not necessarily the best approach in every coaching session and explains the implications and consequences of automatically goal setting. Finally, in service of enabling coachees to better achieve their desired outcomes, it offers some concepts which could free the coaching dyad from the practice of starting sessions with always asking coachees for their goals.

Keywords: outcomes, goals, goal-free coaching

Introduction

What if coaches and coachees could be freed from the "tyranny" (Clutterbuck, 2010, p. 73) of specific goal setting for a session or programme? What possibilities might arise if we allow sessions to develop and flow organically in a certain direction, but without a specific destination or goal? In this article, I argue that goal-focused coaching is not always in the coachee's interests and explore different ways in which coaches might help coachees navigate towards what they desire from the intervention.

Goals are seen to be a fundamental part of the coaching process originating in Whitmore's (1992) seminal work on "Coaching for Performance." His assertion that "We invariably begin a coaching session by determining a goal for the session itself" (Whitmore, 2011 p. 60) has remained hugely influential with coach training organisations, the academic and practitioner literature, and the professional bodies. Goals continue to play an important part in coaching's development (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2016). The International Coaching Federation (ICF), for example, clearly states that "clear, achievable goals" are one of the benefits of coaching (ICF, 2025a). However, it is apparent there is a great deal of confusion over the term "goal" and its exact meaning. As Grant (2019 pp. 34-5) has pointed out, the term "goal" is generally understood as being "the purpose toward which an endeavour is directed; an objective or outcome." He observes that the "lack of precision… makes it hard to distinguish between various aspects of the goal construct such as 'aims,' 'objectives,' 'desires,' or 'outcomes.' Moreover, as Grant (2012) noted, "goals" are widely believed to be the same as SMART action plans. I will thus distinguish between a "goal" – which Locke & Latham (2009 pp. 19-20) define as "a regulatory mechanism for monitoring, evaluating, and adjusting one's behavior… [providing] a sense of accomplishment" and serving "as a standard for assessing one's personal effectiveness" – and an "outcome," which is a "result or effect of an action, situation etc." (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024).

Even within the dominant narrative that coaching starts with goal setting, some authors have questioned the validity of this approach, (including Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2012; Ordóñez et al., 2009). Further, my own experience as a coach suggests that setting goals too early – or, sometimes, at all – can be problematic for coachees: they may not know what goal they want to achieve and often, even if a goal has been agreed, it changes during the course of the coaching as the client develops new awareness or experiences unexpected insights which may also prove highly beneficial (Fox, 2025). Nonetheless, goals remain, as described by Jinks & Dexter (2012 p. 101), "a de rigueur lynch pin" of coaching.

Despite the continued predominant goal-focused narrative in the coaching literature together with the prominence of goals in many coach development courses and as part of the coaching bodies' competency frameworks, setting them is not necessarily in a coachee's best interests. I will suggest why that is and the consequences of goal setting without giving sufficient attention to the context and situation, before proposing different ways the coaching process might unfold to help coachees achieved their intended outcomes.

Goals in coaching

As Whitmore (1992) himself readily acknowledged, the original concept of executive coaching arose from performance sports. His focus was thus on performance goals; however, it is important to note that he also distinguished between *end* goals and *performance* goals. Whilst this distinction is now largely overlooked, it is clear that end goals are the final objective desired – which are outside the coachee's control – and performance goals for which the coachee does have control (Whitmore, 2011). Recent definitions of coaching continue to propagate the notion that it is "inherently a goal-focused activity" (Grant, 2019 p. 34) and many coaching programmes continue to teach models which fundamentally focus on goals (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2016). A study of 635 articles in the coaching literature by David et al. (2014) found that "goal" was specifically mentioned in 83 and the others assumed goal setting was a given, as part of what coaches do. Goal setting and, as a logical consequence, the achievement of those goals, are seen to be core tenets of "good" coaching practice.

In summary, as Grant (2019 p. 36) has asserted, despite some different views, the predominant stance is that "all coaching conversations are either explicitly or implicitly goal focused." Each of the three main coaching bodies continue to refer to goals within their coach's competency frameworks, as shown in Table 1 below.

Association for Coaching	European Mentoring and Coaching Council	International Coaching Federation
Aligns coaching goals to support organisational aims and objectives (Association for Coaching, 2025 p. 5)	Engages the client to explore a range of options for achieving their goals (EMCC, 2025 p. 11)	Partners with the client to design goals, actions and accountability measures that integrate and expand new learning (ICF, 2025 p. 6)
	Describes and applies a range of methods for building commitment to	Acknowledges and supports client autonomy in the design of goals, actions and

	outcomes, goals and actions (EMCC, 2025 p. 11)	methods of accountability (ICF, 2025 p. 6)

Table 1: Professional bodies' stance on goals in their competency frameworks

There are many potential different types of goals within coaching including SMART, performance and mastery, proximal and distal and approach-avoidance goals. However, many coaches are taught to help clients set performance (in the form of SMART) goals (Fox, 2024) because coach development courses need to conform with the professional bodies' competency frameworks to enable coaches to gain accreditation (Crosse, 2024). Consequently, the use of SMART goals is widely practised (Müller & Kotte, 2020) with limited engagement with other types. Further, it is apparent that there is little distinction made between the goals themselves and the action plans which arise in order to achieve them. This leads the "widespread belief that goals are synonymous with SMART action plans [which] has done much to stifle the development of a more sophisticated understanding and use of goal theory within the coaching community" (Grant, 2012 p. 147). This confusion and conflation of terms contributes to a lack of understanding on when and how goal setting may by appropriate, and when it is not.

The issues with goals

Despite the weight of literature which suggests that goals and goal setting are important in both improving performance and embedding change in individuals (Boyatzis & Howard, 2016) there is some recognition of the potential issues around goal setting and achievement. For example, Clutterbuck (2016), emphasises that goals are not the starting point, but a middle point at best, in a coachee's change process. Boyatzis and Howard (2016) have also pointed out that although goal setting can be successful in the appropriate circumstances, one approach or one size does not fit all coaching engagements. Grant (2019) – whilst asserting that coaching is inherently a goal-focused activity – also acknowledged some of the common arguments against goal setting. These include the overly linear process involved which constrains the coaching conversation and which presents an obstacle to emergence; that goal setting leads to coaches encouraging coachees to pursue the original, but no longer appropriate, goals; and that goals usually relate to what might be easy to measure but of little importance. In order to explore the role of goals in coaching further, I have summarised the main assumptions and issues around them in Table 2 below. I will examine each characteristic in more detail.

Goal characteristic	Common assumptions/stance	Issue
Systemic approach	Linear, assumes cause and effect.	In coaching, causality is not a given. Cause and effect models are at odds with the reality of complex adaptive systems.
Type of goal	Tendency to focus on performance goals.	Individuals respond to different goal types. Evidence suggests coachees may benefit equally or more from learning goals.

Overall programme or in-session goals?	Goals are considered over the whole of the programme (distal goals).	Whether goals are distal or proximal can affect a coachee's perception of attainability.
Goals remain constant	Goals are assumed to be static i.e. those agreed at the outset remain relevant throughout.	Goals often change during a coaching intervention.
Approach to determining coaching success	Mainly focuses on dualistic, i.e., "yes" or "no" at end of programme in relation to the original goals set.	Reality is much more nuanced as goals change. Overlooks other ways that coaching could be useful.
Goals are always good	Goal setting and attainment are always beneficial.	Goals and goal setting can cause harm in certain situations.

Table 2: Common assumptions and issues around goals in coaching

An overarching characteristic of coaching sessions, however, is that each one is unique. Whilst this is recognised in parts of the literature (for example, Bachkirova & Jackson, 2024; Erdös et al., 2021), the unique nature of each session is seldom taken into account, specifically in the many models which occupy the coaching space. Nonetheless, despite the lack of research, the implication is clear: there is no one-size fits all methodology or one single approach for goal setting which can work every time (Clutterbuck, 2016; Fox, 2025).

Systemic approach

The disconnect between theory and practice is starkest when considering the systemic assumptions underpinning much of the goal literature. An important goal characteristic highlighted by Clutterbuck and Spence (2016) is a distinction between linear goals, which are viewed as a causal sequence of discrete events, and systemic goals, which are flexible, temporary and unstable. Achieving complex system goals cannot be controlled in the way implied by linear thinking: "such efforts at achieving control…cannot succeed in any long-term way with an open system reality, which is complex, non-linear, interconnected and ultimately unpredictable" (Bright & Pryor, 2016 p. 193).

Goals are, however, typically framed as operating under a linear, cause and effect system. Many of the existing models and much of the current coaching literature act as if goals can be achieved through the application of a set process or series of steps, which will inevitably lead to the pre-determined goal. Performance goal setting, in particular that which follows SMART, sees coaching as a sequential process of discrete steps leading to the desired goal (Müller & Kotte, 2020). Stern (2004, p. 150) elegantly demonstrates the issue with linear models when referring to a therapy session as an

> often ambling, loosely-directed process of searching for and finding a path to take, of losing the way and then finding it (or a new one) again, and of choosing goals to orient to – goals that are often discovered only as you go along.

Even so, coaching both in theory and practice is dominated mainly by linear and reductionist thinking which assumes clients can work to a goal in a predictable way. The implication of assuming linearity and causality is that coachees and coaches are likely to experience dissonance

when the agreed goals are not met, or no lasting change is achieved because the changing circumstances and underlying causes of the coachee's behaviour have not been addressed. Bright & Pryor (2016) note that goal setting can work in relatively stable contexts where a high degree of control over variables can be exercised and the goals are proximal. However, few such contexts exist. They add that the world in which organisations and coachees operate is characterised by complex systems and non-linearity.

Type of goal

With the origins of executive coaching grounded in performance sports it is unsurprising that a significant proportion of all goals set in coaching are performance goals (Grant, 2012). However, as Garvey (2011) has stated, whilst much of the dominant thinking in business around performance can be linked to a (largely male) fascination with sports, the analogy is limited in its applicability to the complexities of the business world. Further, coaching as a performance-based intervention underpinned by the learning which takes place during the achievement of the goals, is fundamentally different from the perspective of learning as a goal in itself: authors such as Bennett and Campone (2016) and Woudstra (2021) see coaching as a learning intervention first.

The effectiveness of either type of goal – performance versus learning – is largely down to the coachees' learning preferences and mindsets (Lunsford, 2016). Individuals who prefer learning goals are more likely to believe they can change which in turn influences their focus on their goal, selection of more challenging goals and persistence in the face of setbacks (Bozer & Jones, 2018). Studies have shown that in certain situations, greater self-efficacy is achieved by focusing on learning rather than performance goals (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002). For example, learning goals – that is, increasing skills, knowledge and abilities in a particular area – are more useful in helping coachees attain their desired outcome in changing environments than performance goals, as they are less susceptible to change (Bright & Pryor, 2016). According to a study by Seijts et al. (2004), routine tasks lend themselves to performance goals, whereas when a task requires learning and adaptation, or is new, a learning goal orientation works best (Boyatzis & Howard, 2016).

Using performance goals without deeper knowledge of their implications can lead to "ill-informed decision making, and the cultivation of inaccurate practice doctrines and mythologies about goals and goal theory" Grant (2012, p. 147). In contrast, it appears that learning goals may facilitate task achievement better than performance goals and learning goals enable the focus to be on the learning associated with the mastering of tasks, rather than the task *per se* (Seijts and Latham, 2001). Research which has focused on goal achievement shows there are significant differences between the impact of performance and learning goals (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002; Grant, 2019). Focusing solely on performance goals thus risks overlooking their relevance to the situation and the coachee's preferences.

Overall programme or session goals?

Seijts and Latham (2001) suggest that distal goals are long-term or end goals, whereas proximal goals are short-term or sub-goals which allow individuals to divide distal goals into smaller, more achievable ones. Whitmore (2011) was clear that the end goals should be supported by the performance goals needed to achieve the desired "end"; in other words, the

actions which often fall out of coaching sessions are in effect a series of short-term goals (Grant, 2012) leading to the overall desired outcome. It is evident that the timeframe being considered forms an important part of goal setting, as the perceived attainability or otherwise of the goal is dependent on the coachee's timescale (Grant, 2012). Coaching interventions are normally focused on the outcomes for the entire programme, without necessarily distinguishing between those longer term goals which lead to the desired outcomes and the interim actions needed to get there. This is unsurprising since it is assumed these actions will arise during the sessions themselves.

A feature of the existing coaching literature is that while *overall programme* goals have been extensively researched and discussed, there is far less on the effects of session goals. In describing the "mini-cycles" through which coachees set a goal, implement actions, then adapt their behaviour based on monitoring and evaluating their performance explicitly, Grant (2019) states those actions are, in effect, a set of short-term, proximal goals happening during sessions. These in-session goals are often articulated as actions for the coachee to achieve before the next session, or perhaps as something to work on during the session itself. However, research has shown that in a therapy context, whether goals are either proximal or distal makes a difference to what the client achieves (Evans & Fletcher, 2013). This raises a fundamental question about priorities: should the goal focus on the here and now to help the coachee in the moment, or stick with actions that support the overall programme goals? It also points to the conundrum about how goals are developed by coachees. By agreeing goals at the outset and then sticking to these, there is a risk that those goals become less relevant to what is happening in the moment for coachees. Equally, focusing only on what is important to the coachee during the session risks settling on short terms goals which do not support their longer term aims for the intervention.

Research of therapy sessions by Ladmanová, Řiháček and Timulak's (2022) indicated that the perceived impact of sessions can differ depending on when the data is collected, that is, immediately after the session or at the end of the programme, a phenomenon also reported by Fox (2024) in the context of team coaching. Thus, proximal actions may not have a noticeable impact until sometime later, raising questions about what coachees might choose to do in terms of further actions to achieve their goals. Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest that in the short term, with stable circumstances and simple problems, goals can be useful. As problems become more difficult and situations less stable, however, the value of setting goals becomes considerably more questionable (Bright & Pryor, 2016). In the latter circumstances, Bright & Pryor (2016 p. 201) advise to "commence thinking in broader, more creative and flexible terms that permit more openness, and more of a wait-see-adapt-respond-try-fail-learn kind of methodology." This remains key to moving away from the fixed mindset of goal setting early on.

Goals remain constant

Goals are assumed to be clearly articulated early on in a coaching engagement (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2016), and remain unchanged. However, according to Clutterbuck (2016) goals may need to emerge or change during the course of a coaching engagement, leading to different assumptions being made at the outset. All this points to a significant tension between the desire amongst coaches and coachees of the certainty and comfort of knowing the end point, versus the reality of working in complex, unstable environments where individuals act in unpredictable ways.

Although it is seldom acknowledged in the literature, goals often naturally change during the course of a coaching engagement. This might be because the coachee is unsure of the specific goals they want to work on: they may have an idea of their wider aim but are unsure how to get there (Lunsford, 2016). Further, as Clutterbuck & Spence (2016 p. 227) noted, "meaningful goals tend to emerge from skilled conversations and often late in coaching engagements." They quote from a survey of 200 coaches carried out by Coutu & Kauffman (2009), in which 98% of coaches said that their coachees' goals changed during a coaching intervention. That goals change makes sense if coaching is considered to be a non-linear process characterised as a complex system. Cavanagh (2016 p. 161) describes this as follows:

> The future is not viewed as an end game to be determined at a single point in time and then created through the implementation of rational strategies. Rather it is a container of possibilities that will lead to other possibilities that lead to yet more possibilities.

Accepting this view of the future and of coaching as a non-linear and contextual process, it follows that there are only very few situations when agreeing goals at the outset of coaching, and then adhering rigidly to them, is likely to be appropriate. Clutterbuck & Spence (2016) cautioned that "inattentional blindness" can arise from sticking to narrow goals; that is, the potential to miss important data or opportunities because they did not register on the coachee's consciousness. As Drake (2015) has described, often coachees do not know where they want to go at the outset and act as if they can simply leap the gap between where they are currently and their goal: this seldom works. To bring about change, coachees need to recognise they must start from a new place only found as they progress in the coaching.

Approach to determining coaching success

The extent to which a coaching programme is deemed successful is often based on a subjective "yes" or "no" as to whether the goals have been met (Fox, 2024). However, such simplistic assessment overlooks other ways in which coachees find coaching useful. Ross (2017) – in the context of therapy – noted that clients had reported unexpected positive benefits; similarly, Fox (2025) found that teams benefited more from new insights and unexpected outcomes than from meeting the original goals agreed at the outset. Further, a coachee's priorities can change during the coaching as they develop greater awareness of themselves and their situation: achieving a specific goal might not demonstrate something meaningful to them (Herdman et al., 2019).

Determining whether the coaching programme has achieved what was intended is problematic. As Doyle (2022) notes, typical theories of change use the explicit goals set as the metrics for success. However, determining "success" solely through goal achievement raises several questions: in whose opinion is goal achievement determined; what if the original goals were not achieved but something else of value was; what about insights developed by the coachee which help them going forward but have nothing to do with the goals; over what time scale is success measured? Coaching can be perceived to be successful in other ways than in relation to goals. For example, if coaching is understood as a learning intervention, a session might be perceived to be useful if the coachee has learned something new, without goal achievement. However, the assessment of achievement remains dominated by evaluations against end goals, leading to a risk that other ways the coachee has benefited are overlooked.

Goals are always good

With goal setting so commonplace in coaching models and coach education, that goals are always good seems to be a given, even if some authors caution that the goals set need to be tailored and personalised for the coachee (Boyatzis & Howard, 2016). The reason for this assumption, I suggest, lies not only in the ubiquity of goals but also because of the origins of executive coaching in sports performance (Whitmore, 2011). Research into goals has not generally questioned whether goal setting is good or not, with a few exceptions such as Midgley et al. (2001) who concluded that performance goals mostly are.

Despite such research, more recent studies have concluded that goals, specifically performance goals, can cause harm. Höpfner & Keith (2021), for example, have argued that failing a specific and high goal can cause harm to a coachee's self-esteem, motivation and affect, with serious consequences for their organisation. Further, they note that goals in general can cause coachees to focus only on the actions related to those goals, so overlooking other important issues and potentially leading to increased risk taking and unethical behaviour (Höpfner & Keith, 2021). Performance goals, in particular, can lead to unintended and unhelpful behaviours such as reduced cooperation, greater commitment to failed projects and concealing information which is considered negative (Ordóñez & Welsh, 2015). It is apparent, however, that if individuals fail a learning goal, they do not attach the same level of blame for failure on themselves compared with performance goals (Höpfner & Keith, 2021).

Different paradigms for achieving the coachee's aims

Having looked at the issues around goal setting, this section will consider alternative ways to think about goals. What if coachees could be freed from the "tyranny" of goals altogether? What if goals are not invariably set at the start of the coaching session? What possibilities might this open up? I am not suggesting that coaches should completely stop asking coachees for their desired goals for the session or programme. There may well be circumstances where setting goals is appropriate but, equally, there may be other ways in which coaches could approach helping coachees achieve their programme aims.

Firstly, appropriate contracting is essential with all stakeholders around the difficulties and issues with goal setting and achievement. This requires setting expectations by re-framing contracting conversations away from the dominant narrative of specific goals or a set objective for the coaching programme. Instead, coaches could consider introducing the notion of outcomes or exploring the coachee's motivations which lead to the desired outcome and which are the driving force for subsequent actions (Jinks & Dexter, 2012). Alternatively, consider asking about the purpose of the coaching: this defines the "desires, higher order values, hopes, fears and responsibilities that give rise to human activity" (Cavanagh, 2016 p. 171). The benefit of doing so is to provide an alternative to a specific end state in the form of goals. Gaining clarity on coachees' motivations and intentions also helps coaches be more present and aware, rather than focused on the goals and worrying about making mistakes (Drake, 2015). It enables the coach to assess the client's readiness and ability to engage in more specific goal orientated conversations, or whether to continue with more vague or undefined aims (Grant, 2019).

Secondly, deciding whether and how to set goals in a coaching session should emerge from a deep understanding of the coachee: their preferences for goal setting (or not), learning style, their stage of development, and their context and support structures (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2016). Allowing goals to emerge frees the coaching dyad to focus on what is important in the moment in service of the outcomes desired, thereby opening the possibility of new goals emerging to address things about which the coachee was previously unaware (Fox, 2024). Recent research by Fox (2025) has shown that in coaching it is these emergent goals leading to new insights and unexpected outcomes which are considered more helpful than achieving goals agreed at the outset. Thus, as the coaching progresses, narratives create

> a landscape of aspirations, dreams, hopes, values and meaning [which] are ultimately more useful in helping a client to know how to proceed than the mechanics of concrete goals, strategies and action plans. (Jinks & Dexter, 2012 p. 104)

Allowing goals to emerge, rather than setting them at the outset, has several benefits. It frees coaches and coachees from thinking they must focus on those goals and those goals only; it creates a space for possibilities and an exploration of the coachee's outcomes; it allows for new insights and goals which may inform those outcomes; it allows coachees and coaches to think about other ways in which the coaching can be beneficial and how that is determined. Nonetheless, it is recognised that agreeing goals at the start of coaching feels comfortable for all parties and gives apparent certainty: for coachees and coach as to the topic, for sponsors and organisations about what the coaching intends to address.

Thirdly, coaches should consider with coachees other sorts of goals which may be more helpful than performance goals. For example, learning goals in the form of new skills or behaviours for individuals less motivated by performance goals. It requires coaches to familiarise themselves with other forms of goals and to contract carefully with stakeholders to manage expectations accordingly. Finally, in certain instances, clients may derive greater benefit from establishing a general direction for the coaching engagement rather than identifying a specific goal or endpoint. This approach aligns with Snowden's concept of "vectors of change" (Doyle, 2022). However, it is important to acknowledge that the prevailing emphasis on goal setting – particularly in the early stages of coaching, as embedded in many coach training programmes and professional practice – may render a shift toward more open-ended or non-specific outcomes challenging for coaches, coachees, and organisational sponsors alike.

Conclusion

Goals and, in particular, performance goals, have formed a central part of coaching since its earliest days. Nonetheless, even if it cannot be said that coaching will ever be goal free (Clutterbuck & Spence, 2016) coaches should remember, as Clutterbuck (2016) also emphasises, that coaching is a learning conversation, not a goal conversation. Further, it is recognised that the less experienced a coach is, the more they need the reassurance of a model to follow and a goal set to facilitate the conversation (Clutterbuck, 2016). Within the dominant discourse existing in the literature and prevalence of goal orientated models in coach training, moreover, goals are likely to remain prominent. If, however, coaches are able to let go of the need to set goals too early (or at all), they may find themselves helping clients more and in unexpected ways. Exploring different ways of helping clients achieve what they desire from the coaching and recognising that "one size fits all" does not work might lead to surprising results. Until it is

recognised that setting goals is not always in a coachee's interests, and can cause harm, coaching as a practice will likely remain trapped by the tyranny of goals.

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