

A Five-Minute Strategy to Achieve Key Goals

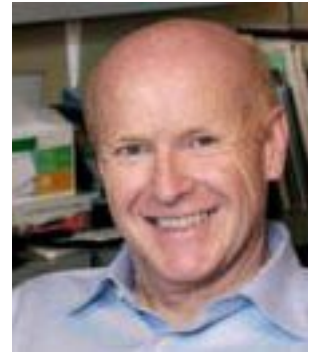
By Dan Richards

January 24, 2012

Advisor Perspectives welcomes guest contributions. The views presented here do not necessarily represent those of Advisor Perspectives.

As we approach the end of January, there's lots of media attention on making resolutions happen.

Recently, a free webcast offered by the Harvard Business Review website featured Heidi Grant Halvorson, a psychologist who has done extensive research in the areas of motivation and achievement. In that interview, she discussed some of the traps that stand in the way of achieving your goals ... and also outlined a proven strategy to make your key objectives happen.



The power of positive thinking

Halvorson first dispelled the widespread view that being confident about and visualizing the achievement of your objectives are sufficient for success. This attitude is expressed in the title of Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* and the well known aphorism by Napoleon Hill: "*What the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve.*"

It's not that a positive attitude towards achievement doesn't correlate with success. Research was conducted with a group of obese women about to embark on a comprehensive weight-loss program. Those who truly believed they would lose weight going into the program lost on average 26 pounds more than those who were uncertain about the outcome.

But there is an important corollary: To maximize your chances of success, you need to also anticipate the difficulties and challenges of achieving your goal. In that same experiment, the women who believed that it would be easy to resist temptation or to stick to their exercise regiment lost 24 pounds less than those subjects who believed it would be difficult.

This finding has been widely replicated in follow-up research with students looking for jobs and patients about to undergo a hip-replacement operation. Those who thought that finding a job or recovering full mobility would be easy had significantly less success than those who went into the process believing that achieving their goal would take lots of effort.

Quite simply, people who believe their goals will be difficult expect to have to work hard and as a result put in more effort, plan more and take more action. The result should be no



surprise – if you anticipate that a goal will be challenging and work harder as a result, your chances of success increase significantly.

A five-minute exercise in mental contrasting

From this research, Halvorson identified the optimal strategy to achieving goals:

First, think **positively** about what life would be like when you achieve your goal.

Then, think **realistically** about what it will take to get there.

To achieve this, she recommends a strategy called mental contrasting, designed to bring into focus the rewards of achieving a goal as well what you need to do to achieve it.

Here's how mental contrasting works:

1. On a clean piece of paper, write down a goal and describe what life would look like and the benefits if you achieved that goal.
2. Then, write down the obstacles and barriers to achieving that goal.
3. Then write down another benefit.
4. And another obstacle.

Continue this process until you're out of benefits and obstacles. Then look at what you've written down – and ask yourself whether you're prepared to truly commit to this goal. One of the advantages of this exercise is that it helps you identify objectives that are unlikely to happen and to abandon unrealistic fantasies. (So much for that call I've been waiting for from Julia Roberts – or my chances of winning that Olympic medal.)

The evidence is clear cut – a five-minute investment in mental contrasting leads to better planning, energy and effort – and greater success as a result. Before finalizing your key goals for 2012, run them through this test – and then reassess whether these goals are right for you.

As a side note, Halvorson's research also shows that the best goals are also difficult and challenging – difficult goals engage the subconscious in ways the easy ones don't. So if all your goals sail through this process with ease, ask yourself whether you're challenging yourself sufficiently – and need to set more ambitious objectives for 2012.

Click [here](#) to listen to a short interview with Heidi Grant Halvorson.



Dan Richards is a top-rated presenter at advisor conferences and an award winning instructor in the MBA program at the University of Toronto, as well as author of Getting Clients Keeping Clients: The Essential Guide for Tomorrow's Financial Advisor. To learn more about his conference keynotes and workshops, email dan@clientinsights.ca.

www.advisorperspectives.com

For a free subscription to the Advisor Perspectives newsletter, visit:
<http://www.advisorperspectives.com/subscribers/subscribe.php>