The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section II. Chapter 11: Goal Setting

Goal Setting

Wise goals can promote increased productivity, skill development, and gospel service. President Spencer W. Kimball taught: "We do believe in setting goals ... we must have goals to make progress, encouraged by keeping records ... Laboring with a distant aim sets the mind in a higher key and puts us at our best ... Goals should always be made to a point that will make us reach and strain."[135] Without goals, confusion of purpose ensues. Thomas Carlyle wrote: "A man without a goal is like a ship without a rudder." Goals can expand vision and provide greater awareness of opportunities. Jim Rohn observed: "The ultimate reason for setting goals is to entice you to become the person it takes to achieve them." Goals can help us to overcome past limitations. Elder Neal A. Maxwell stated: "Our goals should stretch us bit by bit. So often when we think we have encountered a ceiling, it is really a psychological or experimental barrier that we have built ourselves. We built it and we can remove it. Just as correct principles, when applied, carry their own witness that they are true, so do correct personal improvement programs. But we must not expect personal improvement without pain or some 'remodeling.' We can't expect to have the thrills of revealed religion without the theology. We cannot expect to have the soul stretching without Christian service."[136]

Some goals are more helpful than others, and improper goals can be as detrimental as good goals are helpful. Ezra Taft Benson noted: "We cannot do everything at once, but we can do a great deal if we choose our goals well and work diligently to attain them."[137] To harness the full power of goals, we must choose goals that are both appropriate and suitable to our situation. Before we can formulate helpful goals, we must understand the principles of goal-setting.

//

Goals versus Quotas

Quotas, or numerical goals established for individuals other than oneself, are inappropriate. Spencer W. Kimball taught: "Now somebody also got mixed up and they thought goal was spelled, 'q-u-o-t-a,' and it isn't; that's another word. Now there's a tremendous difference between a goal and a quota."[138] Elder James E. Faust stated: "Missionaries should have goals but they should not be imposed by the mission president, his assistants or the zone leaders. I am persuaded that the missionaries will be more dedicated to their work, will be more committed, if they have set their own goals, and happier in their labors than if goals are imposed upon them. The best motivation is self-motivation."[139] In spite of this counsel, some missions continue to impose monthly and weekly mission quotas for baptisms, discussions, inactive visits, member visits, and other items. Effective leadership does not impose quotas. Returned missionary Kevin Buell explained the leadership model of the late President Viacheslav Efimov of the Russia Yekaterinburg Mission, who set new records as the highest-baptizing mission president in Russia at the time of his service: "He didn't have a lot of goals for us. Districts and zones set their own goals. He just encouraged and continued the work atmosphere." Baptismal quotas lack credibility, since the leaders who impose such goals have rarely if ever consistently achieved these same goals themselves for any sustained period. More helpful goals such as members speaking with at least one nonmember about the gospel each week or missionaries contacting a minimum number of people each day allow leaders to lead by example and to expand their own understanding and insight into the challenges experienced by others and their solutions. Good leadership is not fostered by imposing vicarious quotas on others but by mentoring others in effectively finding, teaching, and retaining converts.

Goals and Agency

Time management guru Jeffrey Meyer noted: "set goals for activities, not for results, and the results will take care of themselves," as long as the chosen activities are appropriate. Goals contingent on the responses of others are inherently manipulative and often lead to false feelings of guilt, unworthiness, and discouragement when hard-working missionaries and members fail to achieve them. Missionaries are sometimes taught that reaching their monthly baptismal goals is an indicator of personal obedience. This is contrary to the scriptural principle of moral agency, since missionaries can control only their own conduct and not how investigators react to the gospel message. Noah preached for 120 years, yet no conversions are recorded in scripture. Mormon and Moroni describe their own vigorous preaching efforts that seemingly produced few visible results. Mormon wrote: "And now, my beloved son, notwithstanding their hardness, let us labor diligently" (Moroni 9:6). Yet monthly

baptismal goal initiatives would have branded these prophets as failures.

Monthly baptismal goals introduce subversive incentives and lead to tragic results by eclipsing the investigator's personal needs and shortchanging the repentance and conversion processes in the rush to baptize. The collapse of hundreds of LDS congregations throughout Latin America between 2001 and 2004 due to rampant inactivity and fractional convert retention demonstrate the catastrophe incurred by runaway baptismal goals uncoupled from the conversion process. Thousands of missionaries met monthly goals while neglecting the eternal ones, resulting in impressive statistical reports while leaving behind the emotional and spiritual wreckage of lost souls. What consolation can we derive from statistical reports of numerous baptisms that do not result in convert retention or activity? The wheel was spinning, but the gerbil was dead.

On my mission, the official policy requiring missionaries to establish arbitrary monthly baptismal goals produced considerable frustration, since many monthly goals went unmet in spite of our best efforts. We therefore abandoned the process of setting arbitrary baptismal goals and focused on things we could control, such as the number of individuals contacted with the gospel each day and the quality of prebaptismal teaching and preparation of investigators. Our happiness level, confidence, and spirituality rose dramatically, and our success increased to levels that had never been achieved with baptismal goals.

Goals to teach a certain number of discussions often lead to missionaries forging ahead with discussions that the investigators are not prepared to hear. Teaching an investigator the next discussion is not in the investigator's best interest when significant concerns remain unresolved or commitments from past lessons remain unfulfilled.

Goals for members to bring one individual into the Church each year or to set a date to find someone ready to be taught by the missionaries put the cart before the horse. These programs are demoralizing for members, who in spite of their best efforts to regularly share the gospel are counted the same as members who make no attempt to share the gospel at all, if they are not able to produce referrals or baptisms. A focus on secondary outcome measures such as referrals or baptisms rarely, if ever, results in sustained improvement without members first establishing regular habits of sharing the gospel with nonmembers.

We must choose goals that facilitate our true purpose, rather than false endpoints that do not reflect our eternal aims. We must understand what our goals actually measure and be aware of any potential for abuse. Real growth is subverted when the considerations of quality teaching, repentance, and conversion become secondary to numerical baptism or discussion goals.

Helpful Goals

Helpful goals focus on putting forth a strong effort on a consistent basis and do not depend on the response of others. These goals can be achieved consistently by anyone with application of adequate effort. President Gordon B. Hinckley noted: "If you will work hard, the matter of converts will take care of itself. I am satisfied of that. Give it your very best."[140] Good goals are based firmly in gospel principles, while unhelpful goals are arbitrary. Helpful goals are not manipulative and never sacrifice the needs of souls. Helpful goals start small and help us to progress from our current state. By focusing on work ethic rather than results, good goals ultimately generate much greater benefits to the real growth of the church than unrighteous or improper goals, while simultaneously helping us to become better people. They lift our character and enrich the lives of others.

The best goals are gospel-oriented habits or simple daily acts that can be performed consistently. In the small, quiet, daily acts unseen by most of the world, the real battles are won or lost. Once a challenging but Audemars Piguet Replica consistently achievable level of performance is reached, it is not necessary to continue raising the goal indefinitely. Good goals are stable and sustainable and focus on improvement through consistent performance. Good habits generate regular progress that, over time, facilitates the conversion of others. My preferred goal for member-missionary work is to approach at least one nonmember per week about the gospel and for missionaries to contact at least fifty to one hundred nonmembers each day. These goals involve the direct fulfillment of scriptural mandates rather than participation in contrived programs and are directly within the power of each person to accomplish.

[135] Kimball, Spencer W., Regional Representatives' Seminar, April 3, 1974.
[136] Maxwell, Neal A., Deposition of a Disciple, Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1976, 33-34.
[137] Benson, Ezra Taft, Mission Presidents' Seminar, June 27, 1974.
[138] Kimball, Spencer W., Regional Representatives' Seminar, April 3, 1974.
[139] Faust, James E., New Mission Presidents' Seminar, June 21, 1996.
[140] Hinckley, Gordon B., Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley, Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1997, 357.