

Goals and the Wisdom of a Two-year-old Child

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

Do you have very clear personal goals? Are you confident that they represent what you REALLY want – i.e., that they are outcomes rather than inputs? Making the critical distinction between outcomes and inputs is just as important to our ability to achieve personal goals as it is in achieving business goals. We can use the same tools at home to gain clarity about what we want to do and to specify how we will do it as we use in the workplace. Here's one process you can use either to create goals that truly are outcomes or to confirm that your current goals actually are the outcomes you desire.

Consider this common interaction between a two-year-old child and an adult: the child asks a question, the adult answers. The child asks "Why?" and the adult answers. The child again asks "Why?" to this new answer; the adult responds. This pattern repeats itself until the adult is out of patience or until the "final" answer is reached. I have found that this process (i.e., asking "Why?," answering, and asking "Why?" again over and over) is extremely effective in uncovering organizational and personal outcome goals.

Making the distinction between inputs and outcomes is just as critical in setting personal goals as it is in setting organizational

goals. As I worked with clients over the years, I found a common pattern: when people are asked to identify a goal, they generally will respond quickly – with an input. By asking why they want that "goal," I force them (sometimes reluctantly) to think about whether that's really the final outcome they want. When they respond to my question, more often than not it represents another input. By continuing to push them to answer the "Why?" question over and over, I generally am successful in helping them arrive at their true "destination" – i.e., their desired outcome. For example, an initial answer to the question "What do you want from your job?" can be "To make a lot of money," and that is an input. When I ask why, the answer can evolve into, "To have the freedom to allocate my time any way I want," which is an outcome.

Why is identifying our outcomes so important? In short, because our quality of life depends on doing so successfully. For example, focusing on inputs, even those that sound good or reasonable, usually will lead us down the wrong path. We may get somewhere, but is it where we wanted to go? And what price did we pay? When we arrive we may very well ask ourselves, "Is that all there is?" When we focus on inputs we limit ourselves by settling for less than we could have, or be, or do. Are you willing to pay that price?

Here is an example of how the above process works that also illustrates some of the dysfunctional or unintended results that may occur when we settle for goals that are inputs instead of outcomes. It represents a conversation I had with a student (denoted by “S” below) I was mentoring who came to discuss an important decision she had made.

S: I decided I will change my major to accounting.

P: Why accounting? Don't you hate numbers?

S: Yes, but accountants make a lot of money.

P: Why do you want a lot of money?

S: Because I want to buy a car and move out of my parents' house.

Note: Possibly we could stop here. Setting a goal of buying a car and moving out of her parents' house is fine. But this seems to be an input. What if there is more? It doesn't hurt to test the limits and see if there's something else.

P: Why?

S: Because I want to make my own decisions.

Note: Again, this is another possible stopping point. Let's continue to push though, to see whether there is still more.

P: Why?

S: Because I want to do things they might not agree with.

P: Why?

S: Because I want to feel independent and truly on my own.

P: Finally, the outcome emerges!

What can we learn from this exchange? Look back at where this conversation began and where it ended.

INSIGHT #1: The destination was far different than what she had imagined.

INSIGHT #2: There are many other options that will enable her to reach the outcome she wants AND enjoy the journey!

INSIGHT #3: Stopping prematurely at an input could have caused her to miss out on things she loves to do.

Warning: this process of distinguishing between inputs and outcomes is deceptively simple! It requires time, patience, and some soul-searching to discern what we really want, namely the ultimate outcome. Everything else before that point represents an input – necessary perhaps, but not sufficient for reaching the outcome. And there generally are many inputs that will take us to the desired outcome, if only we first identify accurately what end we have in mind. ➔

Pat Lynch, Ph.D., is President of Business Alignment Strategies, Inc., a consulting firm that helps clients optimize business results by aligning people, programs, and processes with organizational goals.