

Setting goals and planning ahead for businesses and individuals

Opinion piece by Michael Siviter, Management Training Consultant

Introduction

The summer months for many of us is the perfect time to get away from it all. The opportunity to take a break from the pressures of everyday life and reconnect with our family and friends. Hopefully, this time gives us the chance to take stock of how things are going and reflect on our goals, plans and aspirations. For many of us, the summer is also the opportunity to formalise these plans and goals in the form of your annual, performance development review.

The benefits of setting goals and planning ahead shouldn't be overlooked. I am regularly told by our clients that the main reason why solid plans are not put in place in the workplace is due to a lack of time. But what are the consequences of this and are these too costly to ignore?

Outside of work, we tend to be more successful when it comes to setting out our short term plans. It's unlikely that any of us would get into a taxi on a Saturday night and respond with 'I don't know' when the driver asks us where we are going or turn up at the airport for our summer holiday with no flights

or accommodation booked! We like to be organised in our personal lives, set out our aims and plan how we are going to achieve them.

So why don't we do this enough in the office and why is planning so important for businesses?

This download looks at the benefits of planning generally, for both a business and the individuals within it. It also provides a brief insight into some of the dos and don'ts of the appraisal process.

Goal setting

Having a plan means we know where we want to be. It means we can plan resources around the outcomes we are expecting. It means we can work to and meet deadlines and allocate sufficient time to complete our projects and assignments. When it comes to setting goals, we know that these goals should be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time bound) but one of the main reasons why we don't achieve these goals is because we lose commitment. This could be due to decreased motivation, lack of focus or changes in priorities.



When you are setting out your goals, plan as to how you are going to keep the momentum going, will it be a weekly catch up meeting with the team or will you provide incentives when goals are successfully achieved? Research shows that 83% of people do not set goals and the ones that do are three times more likely to achieve them when these goals are written down. Where these planned goals are shared, the likelihood of achievement is also significantly higher. When it comes to your performance development review, have a think beforehand of the things that you would like to achieve and whether these are feasible and appropriate in your current role. Look at the direction of the company - have there been any recent changes in terms of new products or systems, or maybe there has been an interesting acquisition? Get involved and develop goals that are relevant. Not only will this help the business but is likely to motivate you, boost your energy and potentially provide you with new skills and knowledge.

The Performance Development Review (PDR) / appraisal process

Let's start by looking at some of the reasons why the annual PDR process isn't effective. The process usually fails when:

- The appraisee sees the process as a bureaucratic, tick-box exercise
- The appraisee knows from experience that the discussions and agreements which take place during the process are not followed up or actioned
- The appraiser is not up to speed on the appraisee's performance, role, challenges and uses the review meeting to find out what the appraisee 'has been up to'
- The goals set are vague and not linked to where the business is today (see direction of company above) leaving the appraisee demotivated and unchallenged
- The review session is used as an opportunity for the appraisee to 'vent' about past happenings and feelings (reviews should be taking place throughout the year and frustrations should be dealt with as they occur, which clearly requires trust and openness without fear of blame or future repercussions)
- The appraiser carries out too many review sessions in quick succession and loses enthusiasm, displays low energy or falls asleep (*a delegate on one of my management training workshops actually experienced this recently during his annual review after the partner carried out numerous reviews in one day. The partner did apologise and put it down to a hot meeting room, a snoring wife and insufficient coffee, but the damage was already done.*)

- The appraiser not understanding the appraisee's work or life motivations and having a blanket approach to setting goals and not understanding that motivations and values can change and not exploring this with the appraisee through open dialogue.

So what can we do to help ensure the process works for all?

- The appraiser should use positive language and a positive tone should be set from the start. The review should be developmental and not critical but focus on behaviours. Of course, improvement points should be discussed but an 'Ask, Listen, Ask, Listen' approach usually works better than an 'Ask, Listen, State' approach when it comes to making somebody accountable for their self development. It's quick and easy to give people a solution but exploring with them instead about what they could do to improve / the impact their work has on something or somebody else or how they could do things differently in the future is more likely to see a positive change.
- Be a role model for the appraisee - show you believe in the process, follow up throughout the year, know what they're working on, understand their aspirations, give them praise and make links and references to their objectives throughout the year. The appraisee is ultimately responsible for their own career progression but help them identify opportunities and help support them to keep the momentum going.
- Listen to feedback - as mentioned above, the review shouldn't be a sole opportunity for the appraisee to 'vent' but remember that your team appraisals are about you as a line manager too. Make sure you allow sufficient time to explore and understand how well an individual feels you have supported them and what more you could be doing. Ask the appraisee to be specific with their feedback but don't be defensive or try to lead these conversations in a certain way. Follow up after the session on this with your own development points.

When it comes to personal goals and the PDR process, you really do get out what you put in, as both the appraiser and the appraisee.



How about business plans and the communication of corporate strategy?

Departmental integration and communication

Planning helps different departments within a business feel coordinated. Clearly, a tax department will have different plans to the audit department but by each department understanding their own targets and how these fit into the wider vision for the business, individuals and teams should feel a sense of belonging and feel committed and motivated to support the business in the long term. This should also increase cross-departmental collaboration. Anybody ever worked for a business where they have no idea of what the planned strategic direction for the business is? It's demotivating and chaotic and people underperform. Having solid plans in place means people can be set targets and these targets can be monitored allowing people to be developed. Allowing teams to input into the creation of budgets can also be motivational for the team and also useful for the business as these people have more local knowledge regarding what's happening.

Remain competitive

Planning helps a business stay competitive in its industry. In the tax and accounting world, planned legislation changes are often communicated by the government and other bodies well in advance. Why be reactive and wait until the actual change to develop new client services and products and communicate the changes to your clients? There is almost always another business that your client could choose to give their money to so don't become complacent.

Planning ahead will demonstrate to your clients that you are as interested and as passionate about their business as they are and that's what your clients want. It is likely that with technical changes, there will be additional resources required to cope with client communication and to help them understand the impacts that the changes will have on them.

Conclusion

Our lives seem to get busier and busier. We all seem to have more work to do than ever. Good planning helps to create a sense of order and helps to reduce unnecessary pressure, which is surely something that we would all benefit from. The best ideas are usually created when we allocate sufficient time to create them!

Remember the Benjamin Franklin quote 'If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail'? Experience shows that there's definitely some truth in that.

About the author



Michael is a senior training consultant within Mercia's Management Training Division. Mercia Group Ltd is one of the UK's largest providers of training and support services to the accountancy profession. He can be contacted on **0116 258 1200** or email **michael.siviter@mercia-group.co.uk**

The views expressed in this article are entirely his own.

Are you interested in management training or coaching support?

Visit our [website](#) to view the full range of support we offer including bespoke training programmes and open courses run nationally.



0116 258 1200



management@mercia-group.co.uk



www.mercia-group.co.uk/Management