

Easier said than done

I have a long-running debate with myself over something and I'd like to share it with you. Maybe you can help me answer the question or maybe you even wrestle with it yourself.

Is it better to set ambitious goals you can't meet or practical goals you can achieve?

During my time in Corporate America, the former were sometimes called "stretch goals". These were often accompanied by an attractive carrot (usually monetary). In my last company, they frequently "bent" the interpretation of meeting the goal, thus allowing the monetary payout regardless of success. While this was ethically shaky, I don't recall anyone receiving the "carrot" complaining about not really earning it.

In personal life, there aren't as many ways of "bending" the outcome, so some of those ambitious goals tend to run up against failure, as often as not. In today's politically correct world, people seem to have a problem with the word "failure", as if the word itself was as vulgar as a curse word. Now, we "fall short" or are "just a little off" from our set goals. Honestly. It's just a word. And its definition is unambiguous. If you missed your deadline, you failed to meet your goal. In most cases, it's not a world ending event, though we can all agree there are plenty of times it could be quite serious to fail.

I don't have a fear about the word or the result. In part, that's due to my elevated expectations of my ability to achieve. This may be based on confidence or delusion; although it's likely the two are not mutually exclusive. In any case, I tend to set (overly?) ambitious goals for myself and a fair share of the time find I am unable to meet my expectations (fail). But almost always, it's not for lack of

trying my best.

For example A, I give to you my recent work on book trailers for What If? My goal was to design a simple slide-based layout of my trailer and then send it off to some readers for their opinion before converting it into a live trailer. I have plenty of experience with graphic presentations, so I gave myself a day to complete the task. That day has passed and I have failed in my goal. In fact, I'm not even close, having underestimated significantly the collection of the specific images I need. Big deal, right? So I take another day, or even two.

And there's the conundrum. For some people, repeated failure to meet their goals brings frustration, anger, even depression. "I'm a screw-up", "I'm such a loser", etc. Fear of failure creates an environment where someone creates "safe" goals instead; goals they are certain they can achieve. And what's wrong with that? A man has got to know his limitations, right?

Except, if we acknowledge limitations, aren't we in fact limiting ourselves? If you never do that extra set or increased weight when you're working out, will you ever get stronger? If you never push to do something you never tried before, don't you guarantee you fail, simply by not trying?

I'm not talking goofy stuff, like lifting a car over your head (and that's only helpful if someone else is with you to get the keys that rolled under the car). But, as in my example, is it wrong to try and get my project done in a day? My failure (no quotations, call it what it is) was based on a faulty premise (underestimation of time involved obtaining images) not on a lack of ability. I am disappointed, but not despairing.

But the debate is really about why I should set an aggressive goal like a single day when a reasonable goal of "by next

Monday" even, would have been as useful (it's not like the readers I chose would give up their weekend to review my mock trailer anyway).

I think I use those ambitious timelines to motivate and challenge myself. I know if I give myself until day "x" to complete something, I have a tendency to wait until the day before day "x" (or sometimes the same day) to actually work on the task. But that's me and my own mental gamesmanship with my inherently procrastinating nature.

The question I still pose to you is which do you think is better: set those ambitious goals and risk a greater frequency of failure or set achievable goals and possibly risk never knowing how good you can be?

I'll give you a week to get back to me.