"What's Your Motivation?"

Every time I write an article, I get a bunch of emails from people who want me to design a training program for them. I'd be glad to do it, but the problem usually comes down to one thing. I hate to sound like a method actor instructor, but "What's your motivation?" Why do you want to put all this weight on a bar, or mix flax seeds in a blender with berries and protein, or sprint up a hill dragging a sled with a 150 pound backpack ripping a hole in your traps while lugging farmer bars?

Motivation is a funny thing. Coaches and trainers like to see motivated clients. Here's my idea of the perfect client:

Julie is attending her high school reunion in twelve weeks. At the reunion will be her former best friend who's now married to Julie's ex-husband, who cheated on her with the former best friend. Phil will be there too, an old boyfriend she never quite got over who's now living well off the money he made when he sold his Cisco, Microsoft and Yahoo stocks.

Julie is twenty pounds heavier than her "cheerleading weight" and asks you to help her lose it before the big day. If you say, "Hmmm, first let’s put you on a ten week course of slowly building your ligaments and tendons up with some gentle movements to retrain the system" she'll be looking for another trainer before you can further show your complete mastery of idiocy.

No, what she wants to hear is, "Right, eggs only for four weeks, two gallons of water each day. We'll hit the weight room every morning and do sprint workouts at the track each afternoon. I have some 'stuff' banned by the FDA that might help, too."

Any form of hardcore, bootcampish death march ideas will be fine. Stick moderation on the shelf for a while. Julie’s motivation to look hotter than her ex-friend would be one thing, but adding ex-husband and possible future mate into the mix and you have enough in the motivation pot to train blindly, through exhaustion, for twelve weeks.

The worst client for most coaches and trainers is, well, most of us! We know how we want to look or how much we want to lift, but we're not sure how to get there and have no deadline spurring us on. So let's talk about goal setting and how to figure out your motivations. Then let's explore how to put it all together and really make it work.

Goal Setting: The Three "Generations"

There are two major goal setting times each year: the obvious one is in January. Just try to find a gym that has an open treadmill the first week of the year. The other time of the year is collectively known as "Back to School" time (even if we haven’t been to school since the Nixon Administration).

It's easy to set goals in school, especially high school. Each day there's a surge towards the gymnasiums, swimming pools, football fields, soccer fields and wrestling rooms as the athletes walk over to practice. Life, however, isn't like that. Your buddies in the cubicle next to you don’t walk with you to the gym. Mom and Dad don’t bring blankets to sit on while you get your upper body workout finished, nor do you find a lot of cheerleaders tumbling when you rack the squat.
No, goal setting is an adult pastime. Generally, I see the art of goal setting breaking into three "generations."
The problem is simple: Most of us know what to do. Let me say this again: Nearly every reader knows what
to do about losing fat and/or gaining muscle. It’s like telling people they need to put on a seatbelt or to stop
smoking or to floss daily. I mean, we know that information, but sometimes, well, we just can’t find the floss.

I’ve discovered three generations of goal setting which break down very easy into three terms:

1) Should
2) Could
3) Must

There’s certainly a value to each level, but success in life and lifting only occurs during the "must" phase of
goal setting. Let's go through each one by one.

The Should Phase

As we go through our first stages of life, we enter into a goal setting phase I call the "Should Phase."

- You should go to a nice college.
- You should get a job.
- You should mow the lawn.

It all suggests a better approach to what you're doing. Most of us who lift weights and watch what we eat live
in the "shadow of should." I went to a workshop and the speaker kept repeating "Don’t should on yourself."
It was funny… the first time, but she did make a good point.

The "should" approach to goal setting is where most of us live as adults:

- I should lose a couple of pounds.
- I should get to the gym a little more often.
- I should really try to keep an eye on my eating.

Basically, this approach is worthless. The person accepts the issue, then let’s the problem slide past him as he
reaches for the TV clicker and chips. If you read this article, you probably are beyond "should," but I bet you
know a lot of people in your life who live in "should."

The Could Phase

The "could" phase is the beginning of the path to success. The concept behind "could" includes the belief and
the knowledge that one might possibly be successful in taking these steps. Generally, when people start using
"could," they seem to have a basic understanding of the path ahead of them. In fact, they may even know the
destination.

- You know, I could lose a couple of pounds. I could do the low carb thing.
- You know, I should get to the gym a little more often. I could go right after work.
• You know, I could keep an eye on my diet a little better.

Knowledge is power in the "could" stage. You know what to do, but just don’t seem to find the power to do it.

And you know what: Not one thing I've written so far matters at all because to be truly great, you've got to make your goals "musts." And that, my friends, is the key to success in sports and training. Let's get to it then!

**The Must Phase**

The single best piece of diet advice I ever heard came from (don't laugh!) peak performance consultant Anthony Robbins. Robbins got his advice from one of his clients. It's called the "Alpo Diet." Invite a dozen friends over to your house. Tell them that by the end of the month you're going to lose ten pounds. Tell them that if you don’t, you'll eat the can of Alpo in front of them.

Well, as long as it has gravy…

For the next week, every time you feel the urge to take a piece of chocolate from the cubicle next to you, reread the contents of the Alpo can. If someone offers you something smothered in goo, open the Alpo can and take a good deep sniff.

You see, this is the crux of goal setting: Rarely do people improve because of the pleasure of the goal; rather it's pain that sets them on a goal.

**The Pleasure and the Pain**

I use a simple, four-square chart for my athletes. I ask them to fill in the four boxes:

- What "pleasure" will you get if you "do" get your goals?
- What "pain" will you get if you "don’t" get your goals?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Goal</th>
<th>Pain</th>
<th>Pleasure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You know, those are the obvious two, but it's these two questions that make the difference:

- What "pain" will you get if you "do" get your goals? (Be sure to reread that!)
- What "pleasure" will get if you "don't" get your goals?

I've worked with dozens of athletes with this simple chart and the remarkable thing about all of this work is that few athletes have much to say about the pleasure of getting their goals. "It would be nice to be an Olympian" certainly doesn't stir the imagination as much as "I'd have to eat a can of dog food if I fail."

Pain drives most goals! Someone might say "I can't run a mile." If I tell them their child is roped to the railroad tracks a mile away and they had to get there in less than ten minutes, they might run that mile! The pain of hurting or losing a child is inconsequential vis-à-vis their temporary issues of heart rate increases and sweating.

But does getting a goal cause pain? Oh, no question about that! Think about how many high school seniors will accept a college sports scholarship and then sneak away after less than a week of practice. The new level of competition causes obvious problems, but even smaller goals have issues:

- Losing fat often means buying new clothes.
- Becoming "Top Ten" often leads to the question, "When will you be number one?"
- The diploma issue: Now I have a nice piece of paper, but no job and no idea of what to do!

Okay, so now you see that achieving a goal can cause "pain." But can a person experience pleasure from not reaching a goal? Obviously, the pleasure we get from failure must be greater than the successful completion of a goal, otherwise (and I'm trying to be nice) there wouldn't be anyone available to appear on those daytime television shows with subjects like "people who date their cousin's pets."

Think of how many athletic careers have been ruined by "love" ("Sorry guys, but I need to spend more time with Yolanda"), cars, boats or whatever eats up all the athlete's time and resources. For the record, I can understand why someone would trade making love for making weight for wrestling, but we have to at least realize that this is part of the issue with achieving goals. That stuff can certainly get in the way of accomplishment, so failing can be pleasurable in a sense. If you know this, you may be able to recognize and avoid it if you truly want to reach your goals.

Most of this, of course, has almost nothing to do with why Julie is going to be extremely successful in losing those twenty pounds. Julie is going to lose those twenty pounds or more because she's eating Alpo! The pain she feels when she thinks of the betrayal of her friend and husband will keep her forking down eggs long after the rest of us have pulled out the chips and TV clicker. Pain motivates most people much better than pleasure. Sorry, but it's true.

Making "Musts"

So, how do you make things a must? A couple of ideas:
• First, put it out there: Tell people what you want to do and enlist them to help. Talk to people who've done what you're attempting. Let them know what you want to do.

• Second, grab the Alpo or whatever will stimulate you to "do or not do" what you have to do or not do. What in your life would bring you enormous pain? Here's an idea: If you don't lose those ten pounds, your brother sends in your application, signed and sealed, to join the Marine Corps or French Foreign Legion. I can guarantee that those ten pounds will come off in boot camp.

Or how about this: Post your "before" photo on the T-Nation site. Tell everyone when you're going to post your "after." Tell them that if you don't, they should keep bumping the shameful "before" until you come through with the "after."

• Next, and this is the odd one, start "acting" like you've already achieved the goal. Hit the beach like you lost those ten pounds or buy new clothes with the goal in mind. (The brain is easy to fool; just go to Disneyland and look at what people wear.) Start acting like you've accomplished something and, often before you know it, you've accomplished it.

When you succeed or fail, generally, it comes back to the question that's plagued actors for a century: "What’s my motivation?" Sniff some dog food and walk back to the squat rack!

About the Author

Dan John is the Diocesan Director of Religious Education for the Diocese of Salt Lake City and a full-time "on-line" religious studies instructor for Columbia College of Missouri. Originally from South San Francisco, Dan came to Utah to throw the discus for Utah State University and never left. He has Masters degrees in history and in religious education, as well as having done intensive work at the American University in Cairo, University of Haifa, and Cornell.

Currently, Dan is ranked number one in the world in the Highland Games, ages 45-49, broke the American record in the Weight Pentathlon last August, holds numerous National Championships in weightlifting and throwing and maintains a full-time free internet coaching site at http://danjohn.org/coach.

© 1998 — 2004 Testosterone, LLC. All Rights Reserved.