

SETTING GOALS AND RECOGNISING PROGRESS

Introduction

To make lasting changes to their lives, prisoners need to believe they can grow, improve, and change. But it's hard for prisoners to believe this until they see it happening. A prisoner who feels they keep failing – that they are a failure – won't change their mind after a pep talk or a few days stuck in their cell. They need to make progress: they need to set goals and see themselves succeed. When people set goals, they're much more likely to act. Action leads towards success. Success builds belief that they can succeed and change. Belief allows them to pursue bigger changes. Continued success and growing belief allows them to see themselves differently: to take on a new identity.

A goal can be anything that means something to the prisoner. They may want to prepare for release: completing a course or finding accommodation, for example. They could pick up a skill which can be practised on the wing, like cutting hair, or winning a game of pool. Alternatively, there might be something small but important to them: writing a letter to a family member, or teaching another prisoner to read.

What matters is the prisoner adopting the goal, pursuing it, and succeeding. Fulfilling one goal allows the prisoner to see that they can make changes, and encourages them to keep going. We can point to one success to encourage the prisoner to set another, more ambitious goal, or to encourage them to keep going when things get tough: "Come on, you've done this once, you know you can do it again." Success breeds success.

We can help prisoners set goals and recognise progress by:

- Helping them choose manageable and meaningful goals
- Encouraging them to pursue those goals
- Helping them recognise the progress they've made

How can you pursue this strategy?

- A. Setting meaningful goals:** A goal must be ambitious enough to be worth pursuing, but achievable enough to seem doable. Big goals are great, but they don't guide next steps. A prisoner may want a settled life, a decent job, and a home: they need immediately achievable goals which work towards this. Similarly, vague goals don't help much, because they don't guide action. A prisoner may want to "turn things around:" we need to help them work out how to do this. So we want to help prisoners set goals which are specific, immediate and achievable. For example, we might

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encourage them to pick an immediate target: “What do you want to be able to do next week?” We might also help to make the goal more specific: “How will you know you’ve succeeded?” Creating a concrete goal, which the prisoner can meet, encourages them to act.

- B. **Support progress:** We can give prisoners the support, encouragement and guidance they need to pursue the goal. They might need practical help or encouragement, like support in writing an application or preparing for a conversation. We can also simply ask about progress next time we see them. This shows we care and may encourage or remind them to act.
- C. **Recognise and build on progress:** When a prisoner meets a goal, we can offer them encouragement and validation: “I knew you could do it,” or “well done.” It’s their success, and we want them to feel that, so it’s important we keep the focus on what they’ve done. We might ask “How do you feel now you’ve done that?” or “What did you do that helped you make this work?” Success is a great platform for further action: when a prisoner has successfully completed one goal, we can encourage them to set the next, slightly more challenging goal.

Potential Pitfalls

- **Getting stuck due to setbacks or unrealistic goals:** Prisoners won’t succeed in every goal they set. If they’re succeeding every time, their goals may not be challenging enough. But the risk is that they struggle, lose belief, and give up. Perhaps the goal was too difficult. Perhaps they lacked the support, the opportunity or the willpower to pursue it. If we want them to keep making progress, we need to do two things. First, celebrate their effort and their achievements. Setting a goal, attempting to change, and failing, is a far greater achievement than not even trying. Second, use this as an opportunity to set a revised and more manageable goal. Failed a course? Let’s re-enrol, or find a more appropriate one. Been knocked back trying to rebuild one relationship? Find out who else the prisoner wants to get in touch with. Failure isn’t a problem – giving up is a problem. Initially, we want to help the prisoner to set a new goal and to keep making progress. Over time, we want them to come to see learning and improvement as a goal, not just success.

Mitigations to using this technique

Consider the following questions to think about the circumstances when you would and wouldn’t choose to use this technique:

- Can you set goals with all prisoners?
- What do you do if a prisoner doesn’t want to set goals?

Final Reflection Questions

Answer these final questions to help to consolidate your learning and consider how you will use this technique in your day-to-day practice in your current working context.

- What is the goal? What are prison officers looking to achieve by using this technique?
- Why should this technique work? How should prisoners behave differently?
- What do you need to do? Outline the key success checks you need to meet to apply this technique?
- What are the pitfalls? When shouldn't we use this technique? What barriers do you foresee to using this technique? How could you overcome them?