

# Rethinking Goal Setting — Is There a Better Way?

by MICHAEL SIPE, Chairman — Vistage Int'l 667

Challenging the value of goal setting might seem like business heresy. After all, every leader has been taught that setting goals is essential. As the new year approaches, countless articles, blogs, and podcasts preach the same advice: establish SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic, and Time-bound) to achieve success.

Across the business world, professionals are diligently outlining their objectives for 2025 — by month, quarter, and year. It's a widely accepted truth: writing down goals is the key to getting things done. But what if there's a better way?

## The Problem with Traditional Goal Setting

After 35 years of coaching CEOs and business owners, I've seen the flaws of conventional goal setting firsthand:

- **It feels like a chore.** Many people treat goal setting as an obligatory task — something to check off the list rather than an inspiring process.
- **It lacks joy.** Few leaders approach their goals with genuine excitement. Instead, the steps to achievement often feel like a burden.
- **It's disconnected from real desires.** Many people set goals because they feel they "should," not because they truly want to. Deep down, they may not believe they'll achieve them — or even care to.
- **Goals are often forgotten.** Too frequently, written goals are filed away and ignored, as people go back to doing whatever they were already inclined to do.
- **Failure is common.** Studies show that most people abandon or fail to reach their goals — or never set them in the first place.
- **It breeds negative emotions.** When goals aren't met, people often feel guilt, shame, and a sense of failure.
- **Success doesn't always lead to fulfillment.** Even when goals are achieved, they don't always take people where they truly want to go. As one saying puts it, "What if you diligently climb the ladder of success, only to realize it was leaning against the wrong wall?"

## A New Approach: Directional Declarations

After decades of traditional goal setting — both for myself and the leaders I coach — I've found a more effective approach: Declaring a Direction.

Instead of rigid goals, I encourage people to ask:

- "What direction do I want to head in my marriage?"
- "What direction do I want to take with my health?"
- "What direction do I want my business to go?"

Unlike SMART goals, Directional Declarations focus on the journey rather than fixed outcomes. They are:

- Aspirational and inspirational
- Qualitative, rather than quantitative
- General, rather than specific
- Descriptive, rather than prescriptive
- Focused on being and becoming, rather than doing and achieving



- Adventurous, rather than obligatory
- Exploratory, rather than destinational
- Journey-focused, rather than goal-focused

## A Personal Example

In the last 18 months, I've traveled to Aruba, Panama, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Mexico. I recently returned from a fishing trip in Patagonia. Along the way, I realized how inadequate my rudimentary high school Spanish was — especially in rural areas where English is rarely spoken.

A traditional SMART goal approach might be: "I will enroll in a Spanish class in February and become fluent by the end of 2025."

But here's the problem: I've already tried that. A few years ago, I set the same goal, enrolled in a class at COCC, and quickly fell behind due to my demanding schedule. Missing classes led to frustration and guilt, and ultimately, I withdrew from the course — feeling like I had failed.

The truth? While I love Latin culture and language, I don't truly want to "learn Spanish" in the traditional sense — especially if it conflicts with my other commitments. That goal, while SMART, was a "should" goal, not something that excited me.

Instead, my Directional Declaration is: "I want to become comfortable enough with Latin American culture and language to show honor and respect to the people I meet, navigate airports and roads easily, and travel safely and confidently."

This statement is attractive, aspirational, and inspiring to me. It brings me joy. It doesn't impose rigid deadlines or artificial success metrics. Instead, it invites me on a journey of learning and discovery.

With this new approach, I can now ask: "What small, enjoyable steps could I take to move in this direction?"

Some ideas that emerged naturally:

- Try the **Duolingo** app
- Listen to more **Latin music**
- Reconnect with my **Salsa and Bachata dance instructor**
- Read a **history of Patagonia**

None of these are "goals" in the traditional sense. But each one moves me in the direction I want to go. Best of all — there's no way to fail. Every action I take is a win.

## The Invitation: Choose a Direction

As you enter 2025, before you start setting rigid goals for the various areas of your life, try declaring a direction instead. From there, you may naturally set specific goals, but you won't feel trapped by them. You'll enjoy the process, make meaningful progress, and have fun along the way.

You may even achieve more than you ever thought possible.

Here's to a Happy New Year filled with positive direction!

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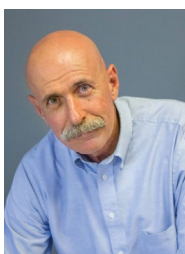
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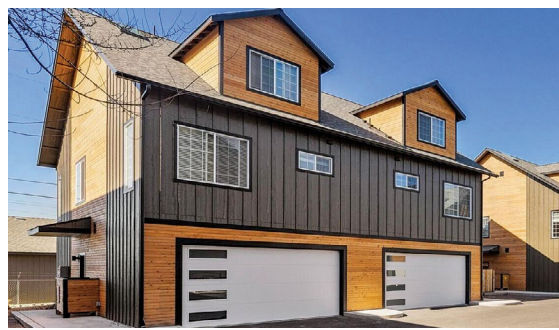
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