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USING GS IN THE GOAL ESSAY TO COMBAT THE IFD DISEASE

DAVID F. MAAS*

AFTER ADMINISTERING preliminary diagnostic exams (uncovering problems in grammar and usage), I generally assign the goal essay as the first graded assignment. Because students draw upon their own experience, the goal essay provides them with opportunities to use specific concrete examples, fulfilling the desired outcome of using examples as an expository technique. I ask students to concentrate on specific personal development goals or specific relationship goals and to focus on one problem or perceived deficit that they wish to remedy.

To help students identify problems they want to correct, I ask them during an in-class exercise to provide ten adjectives describing themselves at their current stage of personal development. Typically, a student might respond with the following list of higher order abstraction adjectives:

• Shy
• Forgetful
• Late for appointments

* Dr. David Maas, Education Editor of ETC, is a Professor of English at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas, and the author of many ETC articles.
• Indecisive
• Careless
• Lazy
• Tendency to procrastinate
• Hot-tempered
• Obese
• Stubborn

I then ask students to pick one of those adjectives and discard the rest. After having listed ten adjectives, students will often indicate one problem that proves more annoying than the rest. For example, if a student chooses indecisive as the descriptor, I encourage the student to identify specific incidents in which he or she has demonstrated this behavior, in order to avoid the less factual, but predictable is-of-identity description, “I am indecisive.”

The IFD Disease

A need for perfection can inhibit progress toward a goal. For example, as the student considers setting the goal to become more decisive, the tendency to view decisiveness as an absolutistic, perfectionist ideal makes goal setting unnecessarily daunting. Understanding the IFD disease will help reduce perfectionist paralysis.

In his book, People in Quandaries, Wendell Johnson proposes a theory to explain why individuals become so overwhelmed by self-improvement programs. (Johnson, p.14) He refers to an affliction that enslaves and paralyzes much of humanity. Johnson termed this affliction the IFD disease. IFD stands for Idealism, Frustration, Despair, a predictable sequence that moves the hapless victim down a destructive spiral.

We could explain the acronym as:

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\begin{align*}
I & \quad \text{People set their goals or ideals impossibly high or beyond reach.} \\
F & \quad \text{They feel frustrated or a sense of futility in falling short of their expectations.} \\
D & \quad \text{They feel demoralized and defeated, and do not desire to continue.}
\end{align*}
\]
Johnson has taught us that we cannot grasp the big picture unless we first see a series of small pictures. In the context of goal setting,

**I**

refers to vague and hazily defined goals — goals that we do not measure in bite-sized chunks or increments.

**F**

refers to the predictable frustration and anxiety we feel because we have not made intermediate, incremental objectives clear in our own minds.

**D**

refers to the despair we feel in falling short of attaining these absolutistic goals.

### Small Steps

When our goals for overcoming a specific problem are not spelled out in incremental, intermediate steps, we can expect the outcome to be demoralization and worry. Motivational expert Paul Meyer describes anxiety about the future as a penalty paid in advance for failure or wrongdoing we have not yet committed. Conversely, he defines success as the progressive realization of a predetermined, worthwhile goal. (Meyer, *Dynamics of Personal Motivation*, p.21.)

Susan and Bruce Kodish, in their chapter on “Getting Extensional” suggest that simply changing the emphasis from *being* to *doing* makes any task less daunting and brings about a great deal of emotional improvement. (Kodish and Kodish, p.145.) Consequently, when students tell me they want to overcome maladies such as ‘shyness,’ ‘absent-mindedness,’ or ‘indecisiveness,’ I ask them to demonstrate with concrete anecdotes that they actually have such a problem or reinforced habit.

In the pre-writing stage, I encourage students to relate at least three incidents to illustrate the problem they intend to remedy. I suggest that three concrete incidents or anecdotes may usefully illustrate a behavior pattern and provide clues for a solution. One student who complained of indecisiveness gave me the following sequential incidents:

*The rare and thrilling chance to buy my lunch at primary school, too often became a depressingly arduous task. While the other bouncing*
fourth graders cheerfully devoured their cream cakes, I oscillated and faltered between salad roll, meat pie, or perhaps a sausage roll. (Elementary school example.)

At any junction, be it choosing between a drumstick or a wing, running or walking, a common dialogue would occur:
“Do you want to go (for a ride)?”
“I don’t care.”
“But would you like to go?”
“I really don’t mind, whatever you want to do, it doesn’t worry me.”
And so the conversation would infinitely circle. (Secondary school example.)

This lack of commitment was embarrassingly confirmed by society’s ‘highest wisdom,’ a computer analysis. According to the Strong’s Interest Inventory, taken in the second week of College, my interests reflect “a flat-profile … having no strong global or general areas of interest.” I just cannot decide. (College example.)

These anecdotes or narratives help cut the problem down to size, making the reified higher order abstraction, the difficulty under scrutiny, easier to analyze. To extensionalize the problem, the student can add index numbers and dates. In the above, the student dated the problem by indicating examples that came from primary school, secondary school, and college.

Finding a strategy to overcome the problem involves setting incremental, bite sized, readily attainable goals. Dr. Sanford Berman, in his cassette program on “The Semantics of Happiness” suggests that Korzybski did not give a formula to be happy, because how happy is “happy?” But he did give a formula to be happier, which is a relative, meaningful and an observable scale. Korzybski said that one should attempt to be not happy but happier, which is a more meaningful statement.

Robert Pula considered Korzybski’s “Happiness formula”: H=ME+MM (or “Happiness equals minimum expectations plus maximum motivation.” (Pula, p.102-105.) Sanford Berman reminds us that both Harry Weinberg and Irving Lee have made modifications to Korzybski’s original formula. Lee proposed the notation H=M/E. Berman explains that “this is a compact way of saying that we ought to keep our expectations of achieving a goal low, and our motivation for working to achieve it high.”

I have proposed a similar formula for overcoming a problem or bad habit. O=M/G:
Overcoming (O) consists of keeping our motivation (M) high while pursuing realistic, attainable, bite-sized goals (G).

As I ask my students to formulate their strategy to overcome a persistent bad habit, I encourage them to look for specific measurable behaviors that confirm the goal has been met. A student writing the goal essay on conquering indecisiveness suggested these specific behaviors demonstrating mastery of the problem:

I want to clarify my future by narrowing a career field and selecting an appropriate major.

I also envision the enormous feat of choosing between Coke and Fanta after only once offering the other person first option.

I want to decide on a prospective date, if I know the time is available.

I recommend the E-Prime technique of one of my mentors, the late D. David Bourland, to prevent the tyranny of the IFD paralysis, as well as the debilitating cognitive distortion described by David Burns as becoming paralyzed by ‘should statements’ (Burns, pp.38, 105), by what Albert Ellis called ‘must-urbation.’ (Ellis, pp.16-30.) Just as Korzybski had counseled that, instead of trying to be happy, we should strive to become happier, I encourage students to realize that an ideal “being organized” constitutes a reification of hundreds or thousands of incremental components that they should plan to tackle one at a time. People can become increasingly more organized, but the absolutistic ‘being organized’ will continue to elude and frustrate them. Ambitious goals of “eliminating clutter” or “waging a relentless war on chaos” inevitably lead to frustration, despair, or demoralization unless students can learn to cut them down to size in measurable incremental steps.

Students may transform a vague, overly ambitious, undefined “be more organized” goal into a less daunting goal by using E-Prime to produce performable and measurable descriptors such as:

- Finding specific places for office supplies such as pens, index labels, paper clips, and post-it notes.
- Finding specific locations to store magazines, books, CD’s and DVD’s.
- Making file folders for accumulating monthly receipts.
Using the extensional **dating** device adds a time component giving the goal-setter a means to assess progress:

*I will reserve next Thursday afternoon, between 3:45 and 4:30 to delete old e-mail and Spam from my computer.*

*I will create an Excel document at 6:30 Sunday evening to record expenses for the car, including number of gallons, miles per gallon, number of quarts of oil, and routine repairs.*

*Next Friday afternoon from 2:00 to 2:45 I will divide the unprocessed clutter on the top of my desk into discrete categories such as (1) personal correspondence (2) memos to be filed (or discarded) (3) newspapers and magazines.*

For cutting down to size the ideal of becoming ‘less shy’ and ‘more outgoing’ the student may want to use **E-Prime** to break the reified static abstraction into a set of specific measurable physical responses:

*At the forum or assembly Thursday at 11:00, I will introduce myself to one stranger, extending my hand, establishing eye contact, and asking two specific non-threatening questions such as “What did you think of the musical selection today?” “What major have you declared?” or “In what part of the country do you live?”*

*I plan to rehearse the punch lines of two jokes I heard in Jay Leno’s monologue last night, and practice on fellow passengers in the elevator.*

*I will look for someone who appears to look as uncomfortable as I do at public gatherings and attempt to make this individual more comfortable.*

The Biblical Good Samaritan was not praised for his “altruism,” “neighborliness,” or his “way of outgoing concern,” but instead for concrete behaviors such as “bandaging wounds,” “pouring on oil and wine,” “setting him on his own animal,” “brought him to an inn,” and “took care of him.” (Luke 10:34.)

Most students feel comfortable with some kind of outline to help them sort out their accumulated thoughts, reflections, or evaluations. I have recommended several outlines provided by motivational specialists such as Dale Carnegie or Paul Meyer to help students place their essay into a sequential pattern. In Dale Carnegie’s classic self help book *How to Stop Worrying*, he introduces an exercise by Galen Litchfield to control worry, designed to help people isolate, con-
cretize, and cut down to size high-order abstractions that lead to the IFD disease:

Question No. 1 – **What am I worrying about?**

(Please write the answer to that question in the space below.)

Question No. 2 – **What can I do about it?**

Question No. 3 – **Here is what I am going to do about it.**

Question No. 4 – **When am I going to start doing it?**

(Carnegie, pp.47-48)

Motivational Specialist Paul Meyer in his Success Motivation Institute’s *Guide to Success and Achievement: Plan of Action*, provides a similar analytical outline for goal setting:

1. What do I **want** from life?
2. Why don’t I have them **already**?
3. What are the obstacles and roadblocks that stand in the way of my **getting** them?
4. What are the ways of **overcoming** the obstacles?
5. What are the **rewards** if I do it?
6. Is it **worth** it to me?

(Meyer, p.43)

In the same document, Meyer subdivides goal setting into categories such as *physical development*, *family life development*, *social development*, and *financial development*, followed by a series of specific heuristic questions designed to elicit specific incremental, bite-sized objectives. For each of the goals, Meyer provides blank worksheets with plenty of room to write responses for each goal in terms of:

- Where I stand now (my present position in relation to my goals).
- Tangible goals.
- Intangible goals.
- Obstacles and Roadblocks (what stands between me and my goal).
• Solutions (I will overcome the obstacles by doing the following).

• Target Dates (for overcoming the obstacles).

I have provided a similar set of questions for extensionalizing and resizing the personal development goal:

1. What do I consider my chief annoying habit or problem? (Provide three specific anecdotes illustrating this problem.)
   • If, for example, I have difficulty with tardiness or getting places on time, I need to identify three vivid incidents illustrating how this problem led to embarrassment.

   • If, for example, I have stage fright when I play the piano in front of large groups, I might explain in detail the tremor in my hands, the tingling or numb sensation in my feet, or the accumulation of perspiration when I performed my last recital.

   • If I describe my difficulty in controlling obesity, I might describe the discomfort of my clothes not fitting properly, the red indentation around my midsection from a tight fitting belt, and the extreme difficulty I have ascending staircases without getting winded or lightheaded.

2. What kind of strategies can I use to overcome this problem? (Identify three specific techniques.)
   • For stage fright, I might try soaking my hands in a pail of warm water before performances.

   • I might try exaggerating the sensations, trying to sweat out a quart instead of a pint of perspiration.

   • I might practice with two or three people in the room watching me practice.

   • I might attempt to practice alternate chord structures which will cover up the mistakes.

3. Which strategy do I intend to use? (Describe it in detail, taking the reader through specific steps.)
• I might describe in detail how I will work out two alternate chord structures (first inversion, second inversion, or third inversion) providing a safety net for the pattern I have practiced.

4. When do I intend to begin this program of overcoming? (Provide a specific date or time.)

• At my regular practice session at 12:30 Monday through Friday, I will practice the piano in the student union instead of the safety of my practice room.

• I will volunteer to give a recital at a nursing home where the crowd will show less negative criticism than would members of the college recital class.

5. How will I know that I have achieved my objective? (Give three specific outcomes.)

• The tremor in my left hand will gradually disappear.

• If I forget one musical chord pattern, I will have at least two other alternatives to fall back upon.

• I will feel relaxed during the performance, not just when it is over.

By using general semantics extensional devices such as indexing, dating, multi-valued continuum thinking rather than either-or dichotomous thinking, consciousness of abstracting, viewing goal setting as a leisurely journey composed of incremental steps (described in measurable E-Prime terminology), students can better protect themselves against the paralysis of the IFD disease.
REFERENCES

Berman, Sanford, Ph.D. *How to Think, Communicate and Behave Intelligently: An Introduction to General Semantics*. San Diego; Educational Cassettes, 1974.


