

Why BHAGS (Big Hairy Audacious Goals) might not work for you on the path to achieving success

Linda Anderson, Getting Clear, January 2015

In 1994, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras introduced us to the term **Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals**, a.k.a., **BHAGS** (pronounced bee-hags). They were describing the kind of visionary long-term goals that inspired successful corporations to push forward to achieve incredible success. [Link: <http://www.inc.com/leigh-buchanan/big-ideas/jim-collins-big-hairy-audacious-goals.html>]

The concept of BHAGs soon trickled down to smaller organizations and individuals, who began setting and adapting versions of big hairy audacious goals in their work and personal lives. The idea behind a BHAG, or should I say—in front of a BHAG, is this...if you are going to set a goal—think big, think juicy. The goal needs to be inspirational, challenging and worthy of the energy and attention rallied toward accomplishing it. [Link: <http://www.amazon.com/Built-Last-Successful-Visionary-Essentials/dp/0060516402>]

I thought that the language of BHAGS had pretty much disappeared, until a client told me that he and fellow business owners in his mastermind group were holding each other accountable for their business and personal BHAGS. He confessed that he was having some challenges in accomplishing them.

I completely understood because, frankly, BHAG-size goals scare me.

I work with coaching clients, who want to be more successful at work and in life. We frame big picture goals—start a business, write a book, plan for retirement, and we set immediate goals—improve leadership skills, get organized, manage email, take better self-care. Sometimes, setting goals, even the less than BHAG-sized goals can, can be scary.

Why is it scary? Because, sometimes, the goal you are trying to put words to is just not that clear, yet. You might know the general direction you are headed, but a specific destination point is somewhere in the hazy distance. Goals are scary for yet another reason, because success is just out of reach. It's hard for the reward-impaired (most of my clients, have struggled in life) to achieve something that is always just out of reach.

That's why, when I read Scott Adam's article, *Goals Are For Losers*, I really got excited. He speaks a language that I understand. (*Goals Are for Losers*, Bottom Line Personal, December 15, 2013) Adams, creator of the comic strip, *Dilbert*, says that **traditional goals are demotivating. They require sacrifice and willpower and once a goal has been reached, satisfaction can be short-lived.** Furthermore, he adds—**aiming for excellence requires an investment of study and practice, that doesn't always ensure success.**

So, instead, Adams recommends that we **ditch the goal-focused approach and develop a systems approach to achieving success**. He further recommends that we **aim at acquiring the right combination of skills to support our plan for success**. Here are two examples he shares. They are very different.

The goal approach to *losing ten pounds*

First example—Let's say your intention is to lose ten pounds. In setting this as a goal, your attention is immediately focused on the end result as a measure of success. Of course, you will make changes to achieve the desired outcome, but success is only going to be experienced when the goal is reached at some point in the future. Thinking like Adams, one might ask, what happens once the goal is achieved? Does the feeling of success last?

The systems approach to achieving success

Using the systems approach, Adams says, one might focus on emptying the kitchen cabinets of the less than healthy foods and restocking them with healthier foods. Let's call this the healthy eating plan. The intention is still to lose ten pounds, but now you are focused on the present with the opportunity to experience success, daily. Again, thinking like Adams, when you achieve that loss of ten pounds, the next part of the journey is clear, you don't need a new goal, instead you continue the healthy eating plan.

Here's the systems approach applied to *making a really big life change*

What happens when the goal is just not clear, but the desire to change is? There came a time in Adam's life, when he wanted to leave his 9 to 5 job. As part of a plan he created, much earlier in life, he decided to explore a number of entrepreneurial ventures, not knowing which would meet with success. He focused his approach on becoming more competent, while exploring. He knew that many of the projects he would put effort and dollars toward would fail. That didn't bother him.

At some point in this journey, he took a down-to-earth look at his skills.

[<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304626104579121813075903866>]

He knew that he was good at writing, not the best, but good enough. He judged himself to be a mediocre artist, but not a gifted artist. He knew that he had a fair sense of humor, but understood that he wasn't the funniest guy in the room. Eventually, out of the various entrepreneurial paths he explored, *Dilbert* became **"the one idea that stuck."**

A short segue

While writing about Adams and his systems approach to finding success, I thought of my own journey. There came a time when I, too, was ready to set off on my own and had no idea where I was headed. Like Adams, I took an inventory of my skills and interests. In fact, I wrote them down on paper and kept them handy as both a touchstone and guide.

I did a lot of exploring after that. Over a period of a few years, I attended evening classes, conferences, joined two very different boards at two different times, took part in networking opportunities and various training, continually enhancing my skills. As I moved along, certain interests faded away, while others grew brighter and clearer. In awhile, it seemed as if the right path was right there in front of me all along.

I think this is the real value of the systems and skill development approach to achieving success. **When your goal in life is just not clear, but the desire to change is**, you can achieve success by focusing on building your strengths and capabilities.

On behalf of the BHAG

Let's return for the moment to the subject of BHAGS. Maybe, you just know that you are someone who works harder, stronger and longer with a juicy goal in front of you. If you are, create that BHAG and go for it. You are likely uniquely designed to have an inspirational goal in front of you shining a light on your path. In fact, if you have a dream or a passion that inspires you, you need a goal to match that passion.

On the other hand

If your passion or vision is not that loud and clear, don't wait for a BHAG to suddenly jump out and grab you. Don't even wait for a modest-sized goal to grab you. It just might not be ready to reveal itself, yet.

Here's what Adams and I recommend

Start with what you know about yourself. Don't minimize. Look at the things you *do well enough and the things you enjoy doing most* at work and in life. Let those interests and skills guide you. Own them. Write them down. Keep them close. Then, seek out experiences—big and small—that will polish and hone them. Move toward success by engaging in activities that will reflect back more of your best self. Don't hold off on experiencing success sometime in the future, start enjoying success right now.

And remember to plan for failure

Adams incorporated failure into his plan for achieving success! Think about it. He *planned* for failure recognizing that not all of his good ideas and ventures were going to be the right one for him, which is something he would learn more about along the journey. Failure didn't scare him. So, when working on your own path to success, don't worry about failure—expect it. That way, when it happens, you won't find yourself discouraged. You will find yourself refocusing on what matters more in your life as you look forward.