

# Goals as a Liberating Force

I recently had a conversation with a leader who was frustrated with the ability of his people to set goals and to prioritize their time. It is a complaint I have heard often over the years.

In many companies today, executive teams are in the habit of setting stretch goals that require everyone to constantly work at a sprint pace. Leaders want their organization to aim for the stars. They need results. Fast. Some even hope for innovation.

Yet people are exhausted. There is no more down time. No more time for renewal. No time for play, experimenting, and true innovation. There seems to only be time for working harder.

How do we set goals that are bold enough to yield innovation, yet realistic enough to be motivating? How do we set goals that are not so bold as to create cynicism, yet not so realistic as to be uninspiring?

Ideally, an organization would start with some scenario thinking, exploring several plausible but very different futures that could emerge over time. Imagining yourself in these futures, you can brainstorm goals and strategies that would enable you to succeed there. Then you can come back to the present and identify the top two or three goals for your organization. Keep them simple. Make them sticky.

Next, for each goal, distinguish three levels of aspiration:

The **BAM** (Bare A\*\* Minimum) Goal must be reached for employees to retain their jobs.

The **Stretch** Goal requires employees to learn and grow to succeed, but it is attainable, and if it is achieved, they will get their bonus.

The **Breakthrough** Goal is beyond stretch; it cannot be achieved through working harder or faster. It can only be achieved through significant innovation, through a fundamental re-thinking of some aspect of the value chain.

When organizations develop meaningful stretch goals, plans can be made, targets hit, and commitments kept. Burnout is avoided. When organizations commit to breakthrough goals with a “no penalty clause” if they aren’t achieved, then they create an environment in which everyone has the freedom to truly experiment and play. Work becomes more exciting and less exhausting. You might even see some innovation. You might even have some fun!

What is the breakthrough goal that would bring your organization alive if it were given permission to freely explore it without repercussions?