

USING “THE VALUE SYSTEM” TO ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS

By TJ Neathery

In 2016, Mark Zuckerberg set a personal goal to run 365 miles in a year. He completed his goal while also managing Facebook, arguably the world’s most successful social media platform. Oh, and he finished five months ahead of schedule.¹

Recently, the hyper-productive have attained a celebrity-like status in certain circles. Exhibit A - *Business Insider* has published numerous articles tracking businessmen and businesswomen who wake up extraordinarily early.² That’s the main focus – sleep schedules. Jeff Dorsey (of Twitter and Square fame) wakes up every morning at 5:30 am for a six-mile run. Apple CEO, Tim Cook, wakes up even earlier – 3:30 am – in order to catch up on emails. These people are giants in their fields. They achieve their goals and then some.

The rest of us are left asking, “How do they do it?” And maybe, if we’re honest, the real question we’re asking is, “How can I do that, too?”

The Mythic Study of 1953

Enter the Yale Study of 1953. This study has become a mythic mainstay of the self-help world, a darling of real estate gurus and motivational speakers alike. Like ye olde tales of old, the Yale Study has been passed down orally through the generations. Its popularity seems to rest on the fact that it’s *the ideal goal-based study*. It perfectly proves that setting goals will lead to success. The study goes like this:

In 1953, researchers surveyed Yale’s graduating seniors to determine how many of them had specific, written goals for their future. The answer: 3%. Twenty years later, researchers polled the surviving members of the Class of 1953 — and found that the 3% with goals had accumulated more personal financial wealth than the other 97% of the class combined!³

This is the Holy Grail of motivational studies. The numbers are staggering – 3% of the graduating class amassed more personal wealth than the other 97% combined! And that’s only in twenty years. This legendary 3% would have only been in their early-forties when the follow up took place.

Funny thing is, no one quite knows where the study came from. People can remember famous speakers delivering this story, Zig Ziglar being one notable example. But when pressed, the speakers can’t come up with any hard sources. The Yale Libraries website has even posted in their FAQ, claiming that no “goals study” has ever occurred (and please don’t ask for said study).

This isn’t new information. The existence of the Yale Study of 1953 has been doubted for years now. Nevertheless, the study is still quoted in business seminars and self-help workshops to this day. So maybe the more important question we should ask isn’t, “How will the results of the study help me achieve my goals?” Instead, maybe we should be asking, “Why are people so desperate to believe this study exists?”

A Deep Need

The reason why the Yale Study persists likely comes down to what people believe about the world. Or more specifically, what people *want to believe* about the world.

During an interview for NPR, Craig Silverman, an expert on media inaccuracy, commented on why people might be inclined to believe and promote false information. He said, “We love to hear things that confirm what we think and what we feel and what we already believe. It makes us feel good to get information that aligns with what we already believe or what we want to hear.”⁴

At our core, we tend to believe information that aligns with our values. Values are the beliefs we hold that help us determine what’s worthwhile in life. Think about the values the Yale Study of 1953 promotes. It promotes clear thinking, success, determination, and achievement. It also suggests that the universe is structured in such a way that you will be rewarded for setting clear goals and achieving those goals. It’s a simple argument: *if* you set clear goals, *then* the odds are overwhelmingly in your favor that you will achieve greater success than your goal-less peers.

And not only are we more likely to believe in a study that corresponds to our values (regardless of the study's factual existence), we're also more likely to adopt the study ourselves. We, too, might write down clear goals in hopes of achieving similar levels of success. Values are powerful. They motivate us.

In 2016, Mark Zuckerberg completed his goal of running 365 miles. In 2017, he promises to finish his lifelong goal of visiting all 50 states. This goal might seem arbitrary – maybe Mark just likes to travel. But no, his goal of visiting all 50 states is deeply rooted in his values. His goal isn't just to visit all 50 states, he's also says he wants to meet people in each state.⁵

Connecting people is a passion of Zuckerberg's. That's one of the key reasons why he started Facebook in the first place. Zuckerberg once wrote, "We don't wake up in the morning with the primary goal of making money." Instead, he says Facebook "was built to accomplish a social mission – to make the world more open and connected."⁶ See, Zuckerberg isn't motivated by the goal. He's motivated by his values – connecting people and ideas across the world.

Now before we move on to how you can achieve your goals through values, here's one more example showing how values-based goal setting can set you apart from the rest of the pack. Listen to what Brian Tracy has to say in his book *Motivation*:

When Ken Blanchard and Norman Vincent Peale elaborated on the Fortunate 500 concept in their book *The Power of Ethical Management*, they discovered that the top 20 percent of businesses in each industry, defined by consistently higher levels of profitability (sometimes ten and twenty times the average in the industry), were all characterized as having clear, written values that everyone knew, believed in, and lived by.⁷

Convinced?

What is Important to You?

In order to achieve your goals, prioritize what makes you tick.

According to one academic study on values and motivation, "Motivation relates to what we choose to pursue and how we pursue it."⁸ The infamous Yale Study of 1953 makes it clear that the "what" we choose to pursue is important. Other verifiable

studies, such as the Dominican University of California goals study, also support this conclusion.⁹

But most of us have likely written down a goal at some point and found out later that the goal fell flat. Achieving goals is still difficult even if they are clear. Therefore, let's shift our attention toward the *how* of pursuing our goals. Values will help us do that.

Values give meaning to our actions. In a broad sense, values are those things we prioritize and give value to. They can also act as “guiding principles regarding how individuals ought to behave.”¹⁰ Your values can consist of things you find inherently worthwhile: family, exploration, nature, etc. Your values can also represent your guiding principles: honesty, hard work, vulnerability, etc.

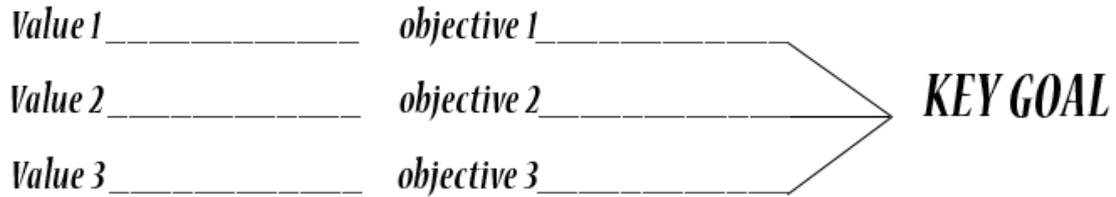
If you align your values with your goals, you can achieve great things. We have this idea that the world is split into geniuses and non-geniuses. Take Mozart for example. He was a child prodigy who composed masterful symphonies before he could even shave. It's rumored that he could replicate complex pieces of music after hearing them only once. Right? It's what we've been told, but it might not be true. Advances in psychology ask us to view Mozart in a new light. Psychologists understand that “impressive achievements of memorizing are not at all rare when they involve the recall of information which is closely related to a person's specialized knowledge and interests.”¹¹ Mozart loved music. He began listening to it and studying it intensely from a young age. Therefore, we can argue that Mozart's values and interests (music and hard work) allowed him to become a world-renowned musician.

By linking your values to your goals, you, too, can find the passion necessary to achieve great things. In the following pages, we will take a look at “**The Value System,**” which will give you a better sense of who you are, what you love, and how to accomplish your goals in a meaningful way.

“The Value System”

“The Value System” asks you to examine yourself. It's also a process of refining your answers down to the specifics. We want to make sure that your goals align with your values. Otherwise you'll be left stressed out and dissatisfied with your life and career.¹² Maybe you already feel that way and are looking for a way out.

Here is “The Value System” in full.



“The Value System” might look a little complex at first. So let’s step back.

How to Discover your Values?

First, you’ll want to identify your **Three Key Values**, otherwise known as Guiding Principles. To do this, make a list with two columns. In the first column write down at least five things you would do/pursue without anyone telling you to. These are activities you find fulfilling. Do you like spending time with friends? Do you enjoy watching nature documentaries? Are you a spiritual person who enjoys spending time in prayer and meditation?

Coming up with this list can be difficult. So let’s take a page out of the business manager playbook. Mark Craemer, a writer for Saybrook University, says, “As a manager, you can find out what your employees are most passionate about by observing where they demonstrate the most energy. Also, you might ask them what they are challenged by and enjoy doing most—quite often these are one and the same.”¹³ When do you have the most energy? This could be at home. This could be at work. And where do you feel most challenged?

Perhaps you’ve previously taken a personality test for school or work. The Strength Finder Strengths Test is one personality test that could help you discover your values. The Meyers Briggs personality test is another example.

Now, in the second column, list at least six guiding principles that correspond to the things you enjoy. For “spending time with friends” you might write, “interpersonal connection.” For “nature documentaries” you might write, “learning.” For “prayer,” you could write, “self-examination.” So on and so forth. We’ll use these specific examples throughout this walk-through of “The Value System.”

Finally, circle the three guiding principles that most speak to you. These will make up the Three Key Values of “The Value System.”

Here is an example of the Values Exploration List:

Values Exploration List

Fulfilling Activities

Activity 1 _____

Activity 2 _____

Activity 3 _____

Activity 4 _____

Activity 5 _____

Guiding Principles

Principle 1 _____

Principle 2 _____

Principle 3 _____

Principle 4 _____

Principle 5 _____

What is your Key Goal?

Now that you have your Three Key Values, let's think about your **Key Goal**. Notice I didn't say, "What are your goals?" Your Key Goal should be a single thing you hope to achieve in the near future. In one year, what would you be most proud to look back on? This could be a work-related goal or a personal goal (but make sure you stick with only one Key Goal).

Perhaps one of your primary work-related goals is to be promoted to a higher management position. But be careful. Make sure your goal is something you can control. Don't set a goal like, "Get a promotion." You don't have full control over that. Instead, consider what steps you can take to position yourself well for that promotion. If you're in sales, make a goal to increase your client base. You have much more control over your sales performance than you do over whether or not you receive a promotion.

Maybe you've had a personal goal to lose weight and get in shape for years now. "Getting in shape" could be your Key Goal. But for some odd reason it just hasn't happened. You purchase that gym membership and do well for the first week. But then your schedule gets cluttered; maybe you strain your ankle, which keeps you home for a week. It happens like this every time. Plus, you just hate going to the gym.

Ok, so you still want to get in shape but your current plan of action isn't working so well. To fix this, let's focus our goal a bit. Minda Zetlin from *Inc.* has this sage advice: "If you like hiking and hate going to the gym, don't set yourself the goal of 100 gym visits for the year just because you think you should. Instead, set yourself an annual goal to hike a certain number of miles or climb a certain number of peaks."¹⁴ Your goal shouldn't be just to get in shape. It should be, "Get in shape by hiking."

Whatever your Key Goal is, write it in the corresponding section of "The Values System" to the right of your values (leave space in the middle!).

Value 1 _____

Value 2 _____

Value 3 _____

KEY GOAL

Objectives that align with your values

Now we want to connect our Three Key Values to our Key Goal so that we can make sure our efforts remain meaningful to us throughout the process. We will do this through **Objectives**.

Objectives help us break down our goals into easy-to-digest pieces. Business theorist and entrepreneur Mark Albion, comments on the need for small, manageable tasks that lead up to large goals: "That is why it is important to develop the habit of taking baby steps, consistently over time. Committing to do one small thing every day will eventually lead to the fulfillment of your big dreams."¹⁵

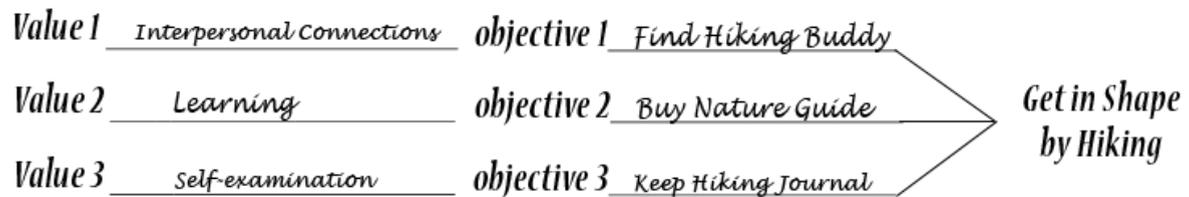
For this example, our values are "interpersonal connection," "learning," and "self-examination." Our key goal is to "Get in shape by hiking." So what should our objectives be?

Our objectives should link our values to our goal in a concrete way. For example, my objective for "interpersonal connection" could be "find a hiking buddy." You will be deepening your friendships while exercising (not to mention you've just given yourself an accountability partner). Not only are you more excited to go on your hike with a friend, but you also kill two birds with one stone. You're now doing two things that benefit your life.

For “learning” I might decide to “buy a local flora and fauna guide.” Read up on the local wildlife before you head out. If you do this, then you’ll be much more alert, paying attention to the natural beauty around you. You’ll feel connected to your environment and what was once “just exercise” becomes an intellectual treat.

“Self-examination” can be addressed in many ways. Maybe you decide to “pray and meditate” halfway through a five-mile hike. Maybe you “keep a hiking journal” where you record all the thoughts you can remember from your day’s hike.

Every person is different, so your Objectives should be unique to your situation. Use your Objectives to connect your values to your goals. See the completed “Values System” below.



Conclusion: Your Unique Trajectory

If you need to, go back to your Key Goal and add clarification. Given the Objectives from the example, your Key Goal might become: *Hike the 4-mile City Trail two times a week with Bob, and then hike it twice a week alone (in order to focus on learning and self-examination).* This is a tangible goal. It’s a goal you care about, and it’s a goal you care about for many different reasons.

These principles work for entrepreneurs and businesses as well. Take Apple’s founder, Steve Jobs, for example. For the sake of simplicity, I’m going to hypothesize Steve Jobs’ Three Key Values based on an article from the *Harvard Business Review* titled, “The Real Leadership Lessons of Steve Jobs.”¹⁶ Let’s assume Jobs’ key core values are *Simplicity, Innovation,* and “*Tolerating only “A” Players.*” And let’s say that the Key Goal is “*Creating a Successful Company.*”

These values lead to distinct Objectives:

- *Simplicity*: Focus on a narrow line of products that do their jobs efficiently and effectively. Think of the iPod and its one-button click-wheel.
- *Innovation*: Don't reinvent the wheel (invent the click-wheel). Apple didn't make a better Walkman or CD player. They invented the revolutionary iPod.
- *Tolerate Only "A" Players*: Create a tough yet rewarding corporate environment. Steve Jobs was known for pushing his employees, and this approach helped make Apple into the iconic company we know today.

The point here is that values shape your end goal. There are many ways to create "a successful company." Take General Electric for example. GE is also a profitable company but with different values. They take a scattershot approach. They operate in everything from health care to software development. Their strength lies not in their simplicity but in their breadth of scope. Moreover, while GE focuses on innovation and invention, they also try to improve already existing products. They ask, "How can we make a better lightbulb?" They're not Apple, but they're still successful.

Therefore, know how your unique values play into your goals. Discover what drives you. Every person is different. Your values and goals will be different from your neighbor's. Hopefully "The Value System" has given you a clearer vision of how your passions can push you to achieve your goals.

END NOTES

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