

Me and Goals Have a Love Hate Thing

I don't like goals.

Kind of blasphemous from a company founder who's trying to build massive, world-changing stuff.

I've written about how I prefer small, daily challenges and daily accretion of value to big, lofty mid-term goals. But I've never had a super clear point of view on goals. Just some vague discomfort.

On an episode of the Office Hours podcast a listener asked a question about goals. It forced me to think a little more about what I do and don't like about goals. I tend to do my best thinking when I have to articulate something. What came out seems directionally correct.

I like really short term goals ("publish a blog post today"), and I like really long term goals (make the world freer when I leave it than it was when I entered). I don't like mid-term goals. They feel constraining, and unnatural. Why aim for a made-up halfway target instead of just aiming for the true, big giant end target?

"I want to do one thing today to make my company more valuable" feels awesome. "Here's my list of ten things to knock out this week" does too. So does, "We want to help launch 10 million careers by 2024". What feels weird and annoying is, "What metric should we aim at in the next 6-18 months?" Which is exactly the kind of goal and time scale that matters to investors, and investors are a key part of success for the company we're now building. But I chafe at this stuff. It feels made up just for the sake of having something to go into a board deck, or to put other people at ease.

We could pick a reasonable metric (and we have, and we will continue to), but it's guaranteed to be the wrong one. Maybe not wrong enough to cause major trouble, but it will be sort of off by a little. Yes, we'll learn that and adjust accordingly. But I struggle to convince myself (though everyone else seems convinced) that we need intermediate goals. We know what we have to accomplish today and this week and (mostly) this month to make the company more valuable to customers. We know what we're trying to do in the world and the magnitude of impact we're seeking.

Do we need to define what the halfway point, or quarter way point, or tenth of the way point is? Do we need to aim for that? Does it help?

I know it does in some ways. It definitely helps me talk to investors and others who are outside the company and pop in every month or so to see what's up. The daily is too granular for them, and the big vision too abstract. They want to know what we're aiming

for on a time scale relevant to their checkins.

But is that a good enough reason to create team goals? For non-team members and non-customers? It might be, because allies, business partners, and investors are key customers, just behind the end user in importance. They matter. A lot.

And common startup advice is common for a reason. It tends to work. If everyone else has found those kinds of goals necessary, it's more likely I'm missing the point than that everyone else is.

Then again, I don't really get excited by arguments for following the crowd.

I need to either find a better reason that I genuinely value to follow mid-term goals, or find an alternative to setting them that still gets us what we need with the relevant audiences.

I'm still searching.