

# Research reveals keys to sustaining long-term motivation

September 23 2015, by Caroline Newman

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How can we stay motivated while working toward long-term goals?

This simple question sparked University of Virginia professor Thomas Bateman's research and embodies a struggle that most of us are familiar with, as day-to-day life intrudes on our best intentions of training for that marathon, writing that novel or securing that top job.

In a recent piece for [the Conversation](#), an academic news site, Bateman reflected on the spacecraft New Horizons' dramatic flight past Pluto, an event that was decades in the making for NASA scientists and required continual motivation in spite of such delayed gratification.

"Many of us know that we are supposed to think long-term, but most of us still struggle with that, at least on a daily basis," said Bateman, a professor in the McIntire School of Commerce who specializes in organizational leadership, motivation and long-term management. "I want to understand what keeps people going even when they are not getting results yet."

As he considered this question, Bateman came across a group that arguably embodies an extreme of long-term thinking: the scientists behind SETI – the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence.

"These are world-class astrophysicists who have spent their careers looking for signals that have not come," Bateman said. How, he wondered, could they still find their work fulfilling when they might not

feel the gratification of seeing results in their lifetimes?

Along with the astrophysicists of SETI, Bateman interviewed scientists doing long-term work in fields like cancer research, biodiversity and geology, trying to determine what keeps them motivated even when results may take years to achieve.

His findings are instructive for anyone needing to overcome short-term thinking and work toward a long-term goal.

## **Four Categories of Motivation To Spur You On**

Bateman found the scientists' motivations could be slotted into four broad categories: possible futures, possible selves, near-term gratifications and task interest.

The first two categories – possible futures and possible selves – address what will happen when the long-term goal is achieved. Scientists often mentioned how their work might impact their children, grandchildren and society in general. Envisioning these possible futures and connecting them to their present work motivated them even when the end goal was only distantly conceivable. Often, that motivation was expressed via allegory or metaphor – i.e. comparing their work in space to the early exploration of the West by American settlers.

Of course, the scientists, being human, were also motivated by the prospect of individual acclaim. How wonderful it would be, they speculated, if they could be the one to make that big discovery everyone has been waiting for and prove the naysayers wrong. They tended to use terms like "pioneer," "explorer" and "adventurer" when describing the ideal they were aspiring to, and those self-conceptions provided powerful motivation.

The second two categories – near-term gratifications and task interest – address the short-term achievements that provide encouragement and progress in the pursuit of long-term goals. The gratifications could be as simple as getting a positive reaction when discussing their work at a cocktail party or seeing a child's face light up when hearing about space. Or they could be as significant as solving one piece of the puzzle or learning about a new technology that brings the goal that much closer.

Such day-to-day learning experiences are critical to maintaining energy and optimism. Nearly all of the scientists Bateman interviewed found their day-to-day work inherently interesting. Even if they are not achieving their long-term goal, they told him, they are consistently learning new things and exploring new technologies or techniques that will ultimately feed their purpose.

Building these short-term gratifications into your daily life can help you stay motivated and focused on your long-term goals, Bateman said.

"People can tactically think about these four categories as they consider long-term goals," he said, suggesting the following set of questions:

- What would the future hold if I achieve this goal?
- What would it mean for me personally?
- How can I build in short-term gratifications?
- How can I build in and appreciate the most interesting and fulfilling parts of what I do?

## **Six Self-Regulation Strategies To Keep You Accountable**

In addition to the four categories of motivation, Bateman defined six self-regulation strategies key to the [scientists'](#) success and satisfaction in their

work. Each can be broadly applied to any personal or professional goal. They include:

- Goal portfolio: Have a clearly defined set of goals that includes a mix of short-and long-term goals.
- Feedback: Receive feedback over time and evaluate progress toward your goals.
- Attention control: Maintain focus on how actions will impact your goals and do not attend to distractions.
- Motivation control: Elevate the attractiveness of your goal by thinking about how risks and work will pay off.
- Emotion control: Diminish negative emotions and focus on what you find interesting and amusing in your work.
- Coping with failure: Use failure as a basis for improvement rather than allowing it to leave you feeling discouraged – or worse, devastated.

Consciously attending to each of these strategies in your day-to-day [work](#) could help make your long-term goals more reachable and make your progress toward that future much more enjoyable.

Provided by University of Virginia

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