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# 1

## SET

It is Monday lunchtime and Sarah is sitting at her desk in the office of the luxury hotel she runs. She is surrounded by copies of the new menu for the hotel's restaurant and eating a lobster linguini freshly made by the head chef. Her office has big glass walls, through which she can see the reception. Happy guests are checking in and out, smiling as they ask the concierge to get them a taxi for the airport. Other guests are sauntering down from the on-site restaurant, which has just won an award for the quality of its food, all sourced from local manufacturers and farms.

Suddenly a bell rings and Sarah snaps out of her daydream. She's not in a hotel office any more. She's in the canteen of her Further Education College and in front of her lies not a lobster linguini but a half-eaten plate of tuna pasta. The bell marks the start of afternoon lessons, and for Sarah it's not something she is looking forward to. It's her maths class, her least favourite subject. She's always struggled during maths classes and found it frustrating when others seem to be more capable than her of grasping the concepts. So it wasn't that much of a surprise to her or anyone else when she failed her maths GCSE the previous year

## THINK SMALL

and was made to re-sit it. As the bell for lessons rang, she couldn't help but feel it would be easier if she maybe just skipped today's lesson, as she had done many times before.

That day, though, Sarah decided to pick herself up and drag herself to the class. When she got there, she realized that it wasn't going to be a traditional maths lesson. There weren't going to be any equations on the board. She wasn't going to have to do any algebra or work out any percentages. In fact, it wasn't a regular lesson at all. It was the beginning of a set of modules that were aimed at encouraging Sarah and her fellow learners to set themselves stretching goals and then to put in place steps to help them achieve those goals. She was pretty sceptical to begin with. But anything, she thought, was preferable to a maths lesson, so she sat down in front of the computer and decided to take it seriously. The first thing that Sarah was asked to do was to think about the things in her life that she really wanted to achieve and to set herself a 'stretch goal' to challenge herself to get there. She had never been asked to do anything like this before and for a moment her mind wandered back to the scene in the hotel. She was really interested in travel and the tourism industry, and her passion was food. So, when she was asked what goal she wanted to set herself, she decided that passing her hospitality qualification was going to be it. If she didn't get that qualification, she'd never be able to pursue her passion.

Next, she was told that she would need to break down her goal into the steps needed to get there. The more specific, the better. She was given the analogy of a singer who wants to get better at a song. The singer doesn't just proclaim 'I'm going to be brilliant at this song'; she identifies the parts of the song that need most work and then focuses on those parts until she has mastered

them. So Sarah started to break down her headline goal into chunks. And this meant focusing on her GCSE maths. That was Sarah's equivalent of the parts of the song that needed most work. Without at least a C in maths, she'd fail overall. So she focused on the things that she could do to get at least a C. She told herself that she needed to spend more time studying and doing mock exams in the library, particularly on algebra and probability. She also needed to change the way she worked, drawing on a few of the techniques she'd learnt through the programme. For example, she found it hard to concentrate for an hour at a time, so she stopped working in hour-long slots. She later explained: 'Half-an-hour slots are really good for me because I take it all in. I have a fifteen-minute break and then I get back into it again.'

The exercises slowly began to change the way Sarah worked. 'It gave me a chance to do what I needed to do,' she said. 'It helped [me to] improve myself and other people too.' And it showed. She was taking home past exam papers to work on them without distractions. She stayed in the library after her lessons had finished. And she was no longer skipping classes. She could more easily see the connection between the individual classes and her longer-term dream of making it in the world of hospitality.

Sarah got a B in her maths exam that year and so was able to start pursuing her next qualification (with a bit less emphasis on algebra). She wasn't the only one. She was in fact part of the biggest trial ever conducted in Further Education Colleges involving some 9,000 learners across nineteen colleges. The exercises were devised by the Behavioural Insights Team in partnership with Professor Angela Duckworth and her team of world-leading psychologists at the University of Pennsylvania. Like all the other programmes that we run, we tested these

changes against the standard approach, to see if they might help people to attend college lessons and ultimately to boost achievement. The results are showing remarkable promise. We are finding that the changes are helping lots of learners to stick at their college programmes. They led to an impressive 10 per cent increase in the number of people who turned up to lessons.

At their heart is a focus on the small steps needed to achieve your goals. The learners aren't told to dream big and then assume that everything will follow. Unfortunately, life doesn't work like that. Instead they are told that if you want to achieve your objectives in life, you need to start by being clear about what those objectives are, before thinking about the small steps required to get there.

This chapter is a little different to the others in this book. Before giving you techniques for helping you to achieve your goal, we will first encourage you to ask yourself what the goal, and the steps towards it, should be. But in keeping with the rest of the book, we have put in place three simple rules that will help you along the way. The three rules to goal setting are:

- **Choose the right goals.** You should start by asking yourself what goals you really want to achieve and focus on those that are most likely to improve your wellbeing.
- **Focus on a single goal and set a clear target and deadline.** You should now focus on one objective (rather than your long list of New Year's resolutions), and set yourself a clear target and deadline for achieving it.
- **Break your goal down into manageable steps.** You'll find it much easier to reach your ultimate objective if you identify the small steps along the way to achieving it.