

Succeed like an Olympian

Leadership experts Stephen and Sean Covey provide 4 steps to reaching your biggest goals - in work, life and love.

- USA WEEKEND, July 20-22, 2012

It's easy to watch Olympian Michael Phelps take command of the pool and wonder how in the world he does it — over and over again. He won an unprecedented eight gold medals in the 2008 Olympic Games, but he's not finished. Starting this week in London, the swimmer will compete for even more medals (if he wins three, he'll top the record for the biggest tally ever). How does Phelps summon the drive for such single-minded perseverance?

Setting goals and accomplishing them takes a lot of hard work, but it's actually something we all can achieve (well, maybe not the Olympic golds). The reason most people lack motivation is because they haven't clarified what is really important. Once a year, everyone should go someplace quiet to think about what matters. From that, develop a personal mission statement and start setting goals. Building off the concepts from the best-selling book *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* by Sean, Chris McChesney, and Jim Huling, we share four ways you can achieve your personal best.

1.) Focus on 2 or 3 specific goals:

Most people make too many goals, or their goals have no clarity. Until you get clear on the one, two or three (at the most) things that are important, you're not going to achieve anything. We call them "wildly important goals."

President Eisenhower in the 1950s had a goal to lead the world in space exploration — a noble cause, but how would it be achieved? His objective was not specific enough. But then President Kennedy came along and got specific: Send a man to the moon and back by the end of the 1960s. He filled in the formula "from X to Y by [when]," and it worked.

It'll also work for the rest of us. For someone who wants to lose weight, her specific goal might be something like, "I want to go from 200 pounds to 170 pounds by December 31." In business, it's also about narrowing the focus. In our consulting company, we've found that it's easy to wind up with too many things going on — proposals for acquisitions and new projects. We've learned over time, though, that every bit of energy we spend looking at a new idea is energy not spent on our most important goals. And when we zero in on our core mission, it shows up in our earnings. The fewer things you decide to focus on, the more emphasis you can give them.

2.) Concentrate on the cause, not the effect:

Too often we pay too much attention to the end result. When people are trying to lose weight, they tend to focus on what the scale is telling them each morning. But instead of zeroing in on the outcome, devote more mental energy to the "input" — things like calorie intake and exercise. The same holds true for a marriage. We know of a family for whom there is too much conflict in the home. To fix it, the husband decided to show love for his wife in front of the kids more often. By concentrating on little acts of kindness, he was able to deliver "input" that would create the desired outcome: a happy house and a happier family.

3.) Keep a scoreboard:

To be successful, you need to know if you're winning or losing. People simply act differently when they're keeping score. Good scoreboards, though, don't have a lot of data on them. Football stadium scoreboards, for instance, usually tell you simply how much time is left, the score and who has the ball.

The same holds for your personal life. A scoreboard is an effective tool for getting out of debt or shedding pounds. The most successful weight-loss programs — like Weight Watchers — have dieters track calories and exercise on a daily basis. That's the brilliance of a scoreboard. Even if you're not trying to lose weight, the approach works. One guy we know swims, bikes and runs in Iron Man triathlons and has a detailed scoreboard that helps him follow the nutrition and exercise regimen to a T. So those two factors — nutrition and exercise — are the boxes on his scoreboard, and he makes a new tally sheet each week to track his progress.

To make your scoreboard even more effective, display it for other people to see. There's power in a public scoreboard, even if it's just "public" within your own house or "public" with one other person.

4.) Report regularly:

We encourage everyone with a "wildly important goal" to meet weekly to assess progress and make commitments. If you don't meet consistently, things fall apart quickly. We have a colleague whose daughter was learning to drive. He told her she could use the family car if she kept it clean. Three weeks in a row, everything was great. Then he went on a trip for two weeks, came back, and it was a wreck. He said, "I thought we had an agreement." And his daughter said, "Oh, are we still doing that?"

Accountability can help with any kind of goal. It's the same thing a coach does for athletes: holds them responsible for their performance. People who train for a marathon often can't do it without a partner to keep them on track. When there is someone on your front steps waiting for you, that's often enough to get you out the door. And once you're out the door, you're well on the way to reaching your goals.

Written by Stephen R. Covey and Sean Covey for USA WEEKEND. This article was the last written by Stephen Covey before his death on Monday, July 16, 2012.

Stephen R. Covey was a leadership expert and best-selling author of multiple books, including "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People". He was a contributing editor to USA WEEKEND for 15 years. Son Sean Covey is the co-author of "The 4 Disciplines of Execution".