

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Locke & Latham

Goal Setting Theory.

### Marginal Gains

And your pit crew.

### The BRIDGE

Brainstorming > Relationships >  
Investments > Decision-Making >  
Good Grit > Excellence.

### Premeditatio Malorum

& Premeditatio Bonum.

### Define Excellence

And go get it!

# Big Goals

The Science of Setting Them, Achieving Them, and Creating Your Best Life

BY CAROLINE ADAMS MILLER · WILEY © 2024 · 240 PAGES

“Just as the Renaissance created a more evidence-based approach to many fields, I believe it’s time for us to move into learning and embracing a science-backed approach to goal accomplishment through goal setting theory (GST) and the BRIDGE (Brainstorming, Relationships, Investments, Decision-Making, Good Grit, and Excellence) framework that I’ve spent years testing and refining. Let’s do away with fantasy approaches like “The Law of Attraction” and learn how to master our environments in ways that build resilience, optimism, and grit. Let’s go from dreaming about big goals to undertaking the journey to make them a reality, regardless of how hard we must work to overcome challenges and not get a trophy at the end of the day.

I believe that every one of us is responsible for leading ourselves to our best performances in work and life. We can’t expect others to do this for us, so my goal is for every reader to learn the skills and behaviors here to develop and enjoy the fruits of a more proactive approach to life. This mindset shift will lead you to a more fulfilling and purpose-driven existence and equip you with the tools to overcome procrastination and work disengagement. By the end of this book, you will have the practical strategies for developing resilience and grit to use every day in your personal and professional lives. The timeless nature of the principles ensures that the book will remain relevant for years to come, and possibly become the new classic in the goal setting field.

Ready to go? Let’s get started!”

~ Caroline Adams Miller from *Big Goals*

*“Thus, if learning how to achieve important goals to feel masterful satisfies a basic human need, and we are born helpless, it means that one of the greatest tools we can learn or teach others is the science of how to accomplish the big goals that are key to thriving. This is my mission.”*

~ Caroline Adams Miller

This is the third Note we’ve created on one of Caroline Adams Miller’s books.

We started with [Getting Grit](#), then we covered [Creating Your Best Life](#). As I mentioned in both of those Notes, Caroline is one of my all-time favorite Positive Psychologists.

In fact, she’s at least tied for first as my all-time favorite PRACTICAL Positive Psychologist—as she has a gift for bringing the empirical wisdom from academia alive in the pages of her books.

I’ve been blessed to get to know Caroline over the last couple years and I’m inspired by not just the wisdom she shares in her great books but the wisdom she is so committed to embodying in her life.

And... I was deeply honored when Caroline invited me to write the foreword to this book. As I said in the foreword, there are a LOT of books on goal setting out there but... If you’re looking for a SCIENCE-BACKED approach to setting goals, this is the one to get. (Get a copy [here](#).)

As you’d expect, the book is packed with Big Ideas. And, as always, I’m excited to share a few of my favorites so let’s get straight to work!

*"The good news is that the science already exists in Locke and Latham's goal setting theory, and it is universally acclaimed, but rarely included, in any of today's popular productivity approaches. Any success strategy must start with an understanding of their seminal theory, which ought to be required learning in every school in the world."*

~ Caroline Adams Miller

P.S. One of the things Caroline and I bonded over in our Heroic Chat with Masters (check that out [here!](#)) is the fact that we need to do a better job at shining a BRIGHT LIGHT on the WOMEN who have shaped our understanding of how we can activate our Heroic potential AND the women who have served as exemplars of our Heroic ideals.

With that in mind, I want to encourage you to check out our Notes on some of my favorite books by women I deeply admire including: [The How of Happiness](#) and [The Myths of Happiness](#) by [Sonja Lyubomirsky](#), [Love 2.0](#) by [Barbara Fredrickson](#), [Grit](#) by [Angela Duckworth](#), [Mindset](#) and [Self-Theories](#) by [Carol Dweck](#), [Succeed](#) by [Heidi Grant Halvorson](#), [Self-Compassion](#) by [Kristin Neff](#), [The Progress Principle](#) by [Teresa Amabile](#), and [Happy Together](#) by [Suzie Pawelski](#) (and her husband, [James!](#)).

## LOCKE & LATHAM'S GOAL SETTING THEORY

"[Locke] set about replicating that finding in dozens of laboratory situations with different goals of varying complexity. He zeroed in on why hard goals had such a positive impact on performance and concluded that hard goals needed to be specific to have the greatest impact, and that they needed to be 'attainable' (which varied from person to person). Being committed to hard goals was also key because easy goals were not difficult to achieve. He also discovered that feedback was essential if a person were to continue to make progress or change strategies as needed. Finally, he observed that self-set goals outperformed assigned ones. These results became some of the anchoring principles of goal setting theory.

There was one unexpected finding that required more thought before it became accepted dogma, however. Pursuing easy goals led to greater satisfaction with oneself, which surprised the researchers because the performance on those goals was much lower. But the paradox was resolved when the researchers realized that hard goals didn't create as much happiness as easy goals because the wins were fewer, and it took longer to achieve them. Hard goals ultimately resulted in more pride and self-esteem because in the real world, the greatest benefits go to those who pursue the hardest things."

That's from chapter #3, in which we learn about the revolutionary research done by two brilliant researchers named Edwin A. Locke and Gary P. Latham.

Locke and Latham collaborated for decades to create what is now known as Locke & Latham's "Goal Setting Theory" or "GST."

Note: This chapter on the science of what DOES work goal setting wise comes \*after\* a chapter outlining what approaches DON'T work—which includes (but is not limited to!) "The Law of Attraction" promoted in *The Secret*, the SMART goal framework, and many others.

In the book, Caroline establishes Locke & Latham's Goal Setting Theory then extends it with her BRIDGE model (Brainstorming, Relationships, Investments, Decision-Making, Good Grit, and Excellence) which we will chat about more in a moment.

For now, I love this passage articulating some findings from early in their careers:

"Latham found that ineffective loggers differed from effective loggers in only one way: the effective loggers set specific goals for daily and weekly cords cut per man hour. A subsequent study at the American Pulpwood Association narrowed the best performance among loggers to those setting specific and challenging goals, not just specific goals. Instead of seeing their work as tedious, the hard goals had given these experienced loggers a new feeling of meaning, purpose and challenge. He and Locke had now both firmed up a key tenet in what became part of goal setting theory: best performance in both lab settings and real-world settings only came from hard, high goals, not easy or 'do your best' conditions."

Note the emphasis on "high, hard goals" that are both SPECIFIC \*and\* challenging.

*"We must learn mastery by persisting through setbacks, which is how we learn to thrive and succeed—and you can't buy, fake, or wait for someone to do this for you."*

~ Caroline Adams Miller

*"Unfortunately, anyone versed in goal setting science knows that the SMART framework is inadequate and can even prevent goal accomplishment."*

~ Caroline Adams Miller

In the book, Caroline walks us through the difference between "learning goals" vs. "performance goals." In short, performance goals are specific outcome targets (like raising \$5 million to make history as the first company to ever raise \$5M via the new SEC crowdfunding regulations) while learning goals (as you can probably guess!) are focused on learning the skills necessary to hit future performance goals.

P.S. Here's something else you want to make sure you keep in mind: *"Remember that Locke and Latham say that a person's commitment to accomplishing a goal is one of the reasons they can succeed, and that commitment comes from having self-efficacy. Self-efficacy also predicts the ability to come up with a variety of possible solutions to accomplish the goal, which is called 'task strategy' in Goal Setting Theory."*

## MARGINAL GAINS & YOUR PIT CREW

"That's why people who are seeking excellence in their performance goals are always looking for a way to be more efficient in how much water they catch and cleanly sweep forward in rowing, how little their head moves while swimming backstroke, or how quickly they spring forward at the start of a running race. Every motion matters so they scrutinize their races for the smallest imperfections to improve.

This was the case with Jeff Gordon, a NASCAR racer who was ranked as a great sports car driver, but who wanted to be one of the best of all time. He and his pit crew team already knew how to do their jobs—for example, refuel the car and change or inflate the tires during the brief pit stops—and they were a united group that was familiar with each other's personalities and work abilities. There was nothing they could put their finger on that involved learning something new about each other, the car or Gordon—so they did not have a new learning goal.

The performance goal they set was to have Gordon pull into a pit stop during a race and to return to the track in 13 seconds, which was a specific, high goal that would require finding more efficiency somewhere, somehow. For every second that Gordon did not get back on the track, they estimated he lost 300 feet to a competitor. Where were they going to pick up those precious seconds?

Gordon's NASCAR team brought in a consultant to help them identify missed opportunities during the pit stop and together they brainstormed possible solutions. Finally, someone suggested that he thought that they were losing precious seconds shouting at each other over the roar of the car motor. They experimented with using new hand signals that replaced voice communications, and that was the difference Gordon needed to become a NASCAR elite for the ages. He retired from the sport in 2015 as the top-ranked driver of the modern era and in 2019 was inducted into the NASCAR Hall of Fame."

*"You're not a failure, I reassured her. You're just a high achiever who had learned everything you needed to know to learn in your last job in order to set high goals and succeed, and you just skipped over the learning part of this new life of yours by assuming that working harder would be the answer."*

~ Caroline Adams Miller

That's another Big Idea from chapter #3.

I want to chat about it briefly for a few reasons.

First, I love the story of searching for marginal gains to boost performance.

Second, I always love a good sports story to bring home some practical wisdom.

And, third, I was struck by the fact that Gordon became an all-time great because of his PIT CREW crushing it behind the scenes.

The marginal gains side of the story reminds me of some parallel wisdom [Matthew Syed](#) shares in his great book, *Black Box Thinking* in which he tells us about Sir David Brailsford and his work with his British cycling team. (Check out [this +1 on Marginal Gains](#) for more.)

The pit crew story reminds me of a series of +1's I did on the power of pit crew including: [Ferrari-Optimizing Pit Stops](#) and [My New Job: Changing Your Right Front Tire](#).

*"When we believe our youth are too fragile to deal with stress, but their brains are filled with images of Instagram perfection and YouTube moments of fame that they have no idea how to achieve, why would we expect them to be anything other than depressed or anxious when staring at their future?"*

~ Caroline Adams Miller

*"Goal setting theory was one of two research papers that became the bedrock of my newfound approach to goal setting and creating success. The other one was 'The Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect' by Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ed Diener, and Laura King. This meta-analysis showed that—contrary to most beliefs—we only succeed in our goals when we are in a flourishing emotional state beforehand. We do not become happy because we achieve something; we prime the pump for success when we elevate our wellbeing first in a variety of ways, from practicing gratitude to having a regular meditation practice."*

~ Caroline Adams Miller

Practically speaking, let's explore a couple things real quick....

First: How can YOU step up YOUR standards of EXCELLENCE (which we'll talk more about at the end of our "BRIDGE")?

More specifically... What's ONE little thing you KNOW you could start doing just a little better to give yourself a better shot at hitting your high, hard targets?!

Second: Who is on YOUR pit crew?!

There's simply NO WAY we can achieve our high, hard goals without the help of a LOT of people. Period. So... If you feel so inspired... Think about ONE person who makes your life possible and go thank them... NOW!

P.S. A number of people immediately come to mind for me. First, my wonderful wife, of course. Without HER, there's no ME (or Heroic!). Period.

Then I thought of my right-hand guy and Heroic President & Head Coach, Michael Balchan. Celebrating him at our inaugural Heroic Workshop Instructor Training/Spring 2024 Activation Workshop Weekend was the highlight of my year. (Check out [How We're Going to Change the World Together 101](#) for more—Big Idea #9 is all about Michael. I get misty just typing that!)

Then I thought of our team that does it all behind the scenes (love you, guys!), our 3,000+ (!) investors from over 75 countries around the world (love you guys!) and... YOU! I'm honored to be a part of your life and grateful to be on YOUR pit crew!

## THE BRIDGE

**"The most important outcome of the work you will do is that you will be moving forward, armed with the right science to steer you efficiently without wasting time and energy on unproven approaches. My goal is for you to understand goal setting theory and how the BRIDGE method can show you how you to get what you long for after you set the goal thoughtfully and wisely with the tools and knowledge in the book, much of which you have probably never seen or heard before. The zombie goal setting approaches that have hung around too long and that won't die—like 'Law of Attraction' and 'SMART' goals—will not interest you once you experience the power of the science I've pulled together from numerous sources that most people never see."**

That's from the prelude to "Part II: Crossing the Bridge" in which we walk through the B.R.I.D.G.E. of Caroline's framework to get from where you are to where you want to be.

Here's the quick recap then we'll explore a couple of my favorite ideas...

**"B"** is for **"Brainstorming."**

We need to start by thinking about our goals and how we're going to apply this wisdom and get what we want.

**"R"** is for **"Relationships."**

Then we need to think about the people who will help us achieve our goals. (Note: We ALSO need to think about the people who might PREVENT us from achieving our goals!)

**"I"** is for **"Investments."**

What investments will YOU need to make to achieve YOUR goals? Aka: What price will you need to pay?

**"D"** is for **"Decision-Making."**

We need to make wise decisions (especially with our time!) if we're going to have a shot at hitting our high, hard goals!

*"The simple act of identifying a goal does several important things: you immediately scan your brain for what you do and don't know about how to accomplish the goal, and quickly identify helpful resources and knowledge; your focus is narrowed and anything that is pertinent to that goal is more likely to catch your attention while useless information is more readily ignored; creates zest and optimism."*

~ Caroline Adams Miller

*"When you write about your life in the future as if everything has gone as well as possible, three days in a row for at least fifteen minutes, elaborating as much as possible about where you are living, who is around you, what occupies your time, and what emotions you experience, your goals can become clearer and you can see that future self more clearly in your mind's eye."*

~ Caroline Adams Miller

**"G"** is for **"Good Grit."**

Grit comes in multiple flavors—there's good grit and there's not-so-good grit of the stupid, faux, and selfie varieties. Caroline tells us that good (or "authentic") grit *"is the passionate pursuit of hard goals outside your comfort zone that awe and inspire others to ask themselves, 'What if I had the courage to pursue my dreams and live life without regrets?'"*

*"This type of good grit attracts the right people and unleashes positive energy; bad grit repels and diminishes you, and has the capacity to destroy your goal and harm yourself or others."*

**"E"** for **"Excellence."**

Each of us will have our own idiosyncratic definition of what excellence entails and we want to take the time to define it!

## PREMEDITATIO MALORUM & PREMEDITATIO BONUM

*"The Ancient Stoics, Greek philosophers who originated in Athens around 300 B.C.E., believed that curiosity was a powerful advantage in staying alive and achieving one's aims. Their rational, practical approach to life emphasized preparation, diligence, and perseverance in response to inevitable challenges. They preached 'premeditatio malorum'—a Latin phrase—which translates into 'preparing for evils' that you will encounter when you are trying to achieve your goal. The Stoics didn't see this outlook as pessimistic; on the contrary, they were optimists whose preparation for the future often led to success."*

*The Stoic spirit of examining all variables to be ready for curveballs and surprises infuses the BRIDGE methodology, which is designed to give everyone their best possible shot at getting where they want to go by being scrupulously prepared. I have added a twist based on my training in Positive Psychology, though, by including a concept I call 'premeditatio bonum': prepare for the good that will cross your path, and not just the bad."*

That's from the first chapter in Part II.

Before we cross the "BRIDGE" we need to "Brainstorm" our goal—seeing where we want to go AND the obstacles that might get in the way.

Caroline references the work of [Gabriele Oettingen](#) a number of times in the book and hammers home the same points we've been talking about for years...

In short, as we discuss in our Notes on [Rethinking Positive Thinking](#): It's not enough to stare at your vision board and hope that all your dreams come true. We MUST (!) practice what scientists call "mental contrasting" so we can make our dreams a reality.

As we've discussed many times, Oettingen tells us that we want to WOOP our goals.

We start by identifying our "Wish" and the expected benefits of that "Outcome" and then we need to rub that vision up against reality as we see the inevitable Obstacles and make our Plans to overcome those Obstacles so we have a shot at making our Wish come true.

I LOVE (!) the way Caroline connects this back to the ancient Stoics.

We need to practice their "preparation for evils" AND... We need to prepare for the good as well.

*Premeditatio Malorum and Premeditatio Bonum.*

Note: Leaning back on some Gabriele Oettingen wisdom...

We want to make sure we START with the positive THEN check out the obstacles.

So...

*Premeditatio Bonum then Premeditatio Malorum then... Carpe Diem!*



" We can fantasize about our big goals all day, create brilliant strategies to pursue those dreams, and then recruit an amazing team of cheerleaders and mentors who stand ready to teach us, coach us, support us and believe in us, but none of these actions will matter unless you are willing, ready and able to make the investments in yourself that will spell the difference between crossing the finish line and being an almost-ran. And the most important investment you'll need to make if you want to be successful is to spend your time wisely and well."

~ Caroline Adams Miller

## DEFINE EXCELLENCE & GO GET IT!

"Be careful to remain true to where you are in your own journey of learning how to make big goals come true. The worst thing you could put on your strategy sheet is an 'excellent' outcome that feels unrealistic or set just to please someone else. I am going to leave it to you to know what outcome is going to raise your self-esteem, develop your strengths, give you more confidence, and make you even more hopeful about your future. A good rule of thumb for me when it comes to figuring out what excellence looks like with a goal is that I was proud of what I accomplished and satisfied that I worked my hardest with a strategy that was well-considered.

I am now sending you out to make your dreams happen. My goal for this book was for you to learn, feel, and experience the steps of identifying, visualizing, and then mapping out a specific big goal, and to then get turned loose to make that goal come true at home, at school, at work, in your community, and in the world. I think this is going to raise the bar for everyone else because you will be surrounded by the passion and optimism that accompanies feeling alive because you are going from dreaming to doing, and from talking to acting. It's surprising how elegant goal setting theory is in its simplicity, but when it is put into action and you have the BRIDGE to take you from here to there, the world takes on a different color, and everything feels a little happier.

My heart is with you, and I wish you well on your journey. I hope that reading this book has had the same impact on you as I experienced when I first learned about goal setting theory in 2005 and I suddenly felt like I had the answer that I'd been seeking to achieving excellence in my life. Nothing has been the same since then, and my wish for you is that nothing will ever be the same again for you, now that you are armed with the tools of hope, change and success."

Those are the final words of the book from the final chapter of the book on "Excellence." As you know if you've been following along... I'm a big fan of the idea of excellence. ;)

We know the ancient Stoics could have summarized their entire (!) philosophy in a single word: *Areté*. We also know that word means "virtue" or... "excellence"—which is why I kinda love that "E" for "Excellence" is the final letter-step in the BRIDGE (Brainstorming > Relationships > Investments > Decision-Making > Good Grit > Excellence!).

Here's to embracing the wisdom of Locke & Latham's Goal Setting Theory as we embrace the BRIDGE that will get us from where we are to where we want to be... TODAY!

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Heroic Philosopher CEO*

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## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson is the Co-Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of *Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential*. He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. As a Founder/CEO he's made crowdfunding history and built and sold two social platforms. As a Philosopher/teacher, he's helped millions of people from around the world, trained 10,000+ [Heroic Coaches](#) from 100+ countries and created a protocol that science says changes lives. He lives in the country outside Austin, Texas, with his wife, Alexandra, and their two kids, Emerson and Eleanor. Learn more at [heroic.us](#).