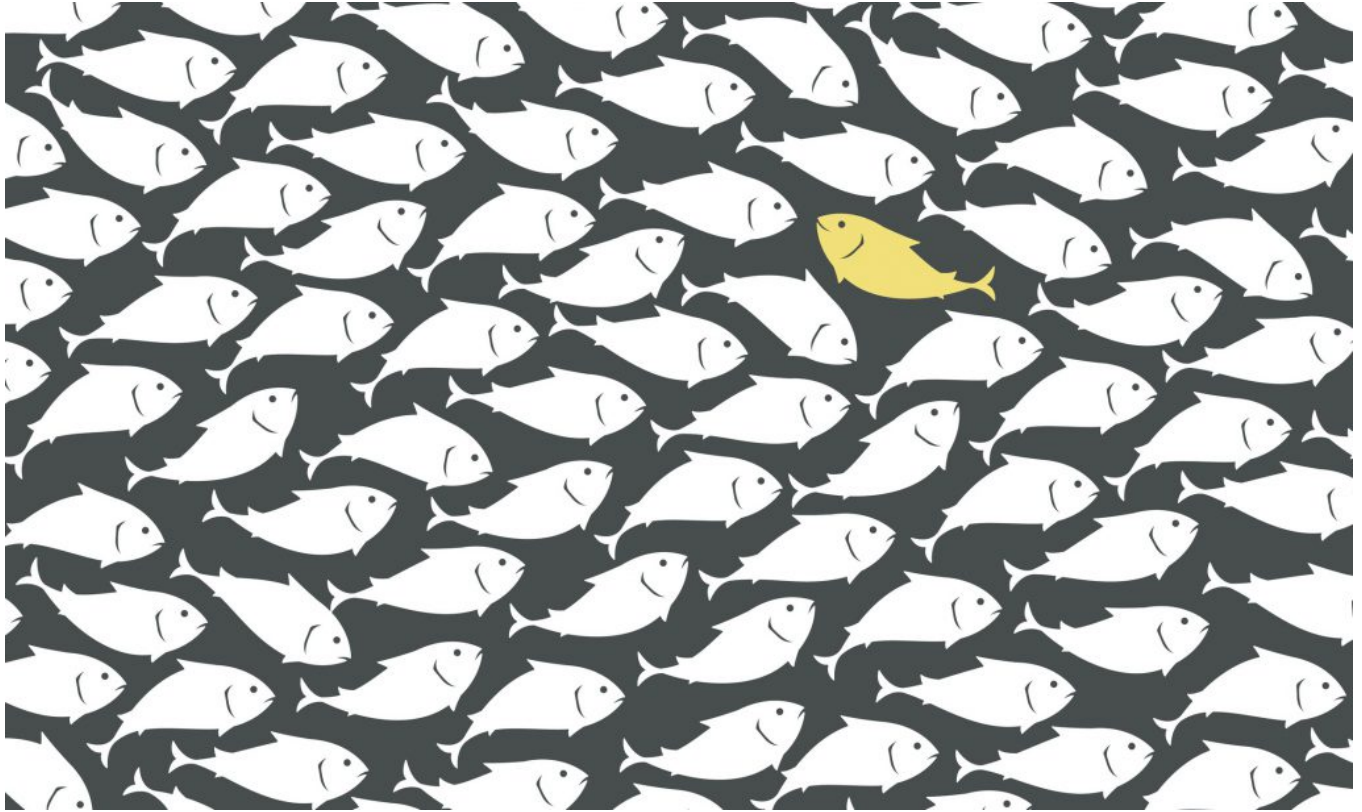


Trying to Get Ahead? Plan in Reverse, Study Suggests

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Motivation research has found that we tend to be the most driven and enthusiastic about a project when we begin it and when we're about to complete it. It is the pile of problems, work, and minor hassles in the middle of the two that turn determination wet-graham-cracker soft.

Researchers from the Peking University HSBC Business School, the Korea University Business School, and the University of Iowa collaborated to see if goal-planning methods affected motivation and pursuit of goals. [Their research appears in *Psychological Science*](#). Over the course of five studies, they had groups of students plan their approach to general school work, unit tests, comprehensive exams, or important job interviews. Some of the participants planned their steps in chronological order. The other participants worked in reverse, planning the steps they would take just before their goal and working backward in time until they reached the step nearest in the future.

“Although extensive research has shown the benefits of planning, little attention has been paid to the ways people construct plans and their impacts on subsequent goal pursuit,” said Jooyoung Park, assistant professor in the Department of Management at Peking University HSBC Business School and first author on the paper.

Previous research has established that making specific plans and visualizing goals all spur goal-oriented actions and mindsets, but also that certain thought processes get in the way of goal progress. Feelings of

distance to a goal, the number of goals in question, and ruminating on ideas rather than actions all slow goal-setters when moving forward.

For relatively simple goals, there was no difference between forward planning and backward planning. If a goal is short-term or requires only a couple of steps, the two are likely no different. But for complex tasks (like planning out how to study for a comprehensive exam), students preparing backward anticipated the necessary steps more clearly and followed the original plan to reach the set goal. They had higher expectations for reaching their goals and felt less pressed for time during progress toward them.

“This suggests that simply changing the way of constructing plans can produce different outcomes,” said Park.

The results held in both academic and career contexts. In addition, participants in some of the experiments came up with their own steps to reach a goal while other experiment instructions provided steps to them. In each case, the motivating effects appeared.

The researchers offer a number of explanations for why backward planning proved effective. Previous work in the field of goal setting, planning and motivation has identified the imagination as a motivating tool. True retrospection is used to review events that have already happened, but using one’s imagination to think of future events as if they were in the past facilitates visualization of both the end goal and the steps required to get there. This ‘future retrospection’ tends to increase the anticipation of pleasure from achieving the goal and helps bring about goal-directed behaviors.

Backwards planning may have helped the students forecast success rather than failure. If one starts at the end goal, the assumption is that efforts were successful to get there, while moving from the present to the future doesn’t necessarily assume success, and forces the goal setter to think through obstacles that might prevent it from happening. Research has shown that envisioning the steps necessary to complete a goal reduces anxiety, increases confidence, and lead to more effortful actions. Further, goal setters feel closer to the end goal in terms of time when they envision success rather than failure.

References

Jooyoung, P., Lu, F., Hedgcock, W. (2017). Forward and Backward Planning and Goal Pursuit. *Psychological Science*. DOI:10.1177/0956797617715510