



Interview with Heidi Grant Halvorson

Recently I had a chance to interview [Heidi Grant Halvorson](#), a social psychologist specializing in the study of motivation and goal achievement. She's also the associate director of the Motivation Science Center at Columbia University

Heidi is the author of some of my favorite books including [Succeed: How We Can Reach Our Goals](#) and [No One Understands You and What to Do About It](#).

I hope you enjoy my interview. There's some great information in it you won't want to miss. You can read it below. Or you can [listen to it here](#).

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Jill: Thanks for being here today, Heidi.

Heidi Grant Halvorson: Thank you so much, Jill.

Jill: I am delighted to have you here talking with my sales readers and listeners about goals. I want to talk about some very specific things that you actually say in your book because I think that they're so relevant to those of us in this profession.

So, I'd like to start out with how you say that to be successful, you can't just do your best. That you need to do something more tangible. Can you give us an idea or an overview of what makes a good goal?

Heidi Grant Halvorson: It's easier in some ways to start with what makes a bad goal. There's a very natural tendency, a very pervasive human tendency, to think about our goals in very abstract terms. So, we tend to say things to ourselves like "I want to be more successful" or "I want to be a better communicator." "I want to be a better sales person." "I want to lose some weight" and . . .

Jill: I've had that goal before!

Heidi Grant Halvorson: Everyone has. Most of us have that goal. The problem is when we think about our goals in that way, even though it's very natural to do so, it's not enough.

We now understand a lot more about how our brains are wired with respect to how we pursue goals. And without a very specific goal in mind, a lot of the systems in the brain designed to help us reach our goals -- the systems that control what we pay attention to, our working memory, what we think about at any given point in time, how much effort we put into something, how much willpower we use and self-control, how much planning we engage in...

All of those things are controlled by the presence of a specific goal. If you have a very vague goal like "I want to do better." "I want to get better at this or be more successful at that," your brain doesn't really know what to do.

One of the very first things I recommend people do when they're setting goals is really get specific. Of course, the question then is "How specific do you need to be?"

I think the level of specificity you're really shooting for when it comes to your personal and professional goals, is to be able to picture the moment you will succeed.

In other words, when you say something like, "I want to be more successful." Well, how will you know when you've done that? What does "more successful" look like? It's very vague.

If instead you say, "I want a promotion to a certain level" or "I want to reach a sales target of a certain level" or "I want to lose a certain amount of weight." You'll know the moment you reach that goal. You can imagine what that moment looks like and you'll know when you reach it.

That's the level of specificity you really want to be looking for. It doesn't take a lot of time for people to do this, to reflect on the things they're trying to do in their professional life, in their personal life, and say, "Okay, do I really have a handle on exactly what success looks like?" When you can say that you do, you've gotten specific enough.

Jill: I think what's fascinating is that without having a kind of specific goal, your brain doesn't do what it can to help you.

Heidi Grant Halvorson: Absolutely. We tend to think of reaching goals and pursuing goals as very conscious and deliberate acts. And they can be.

But actually our brains work on autopilot the vast majority of the time. In any situation you are trying to pursue multiple goals at the same time. You're not consciously thinking about how every single thing you do is getting you closer to a particular goal you have. But, that's in fact what's happening.

A lot of this happens non-consciously. We have a lot of systems in the brain that run largely below our awareness. They are designed to help us reach our goals, to help us select actions and persist in the face of challenges and to give us the resources we need to do the things we need to do. But, the brain runs much like a computer. It needs the right input and that input is very specific goals.

Jill: Cool, one of the things in sales is that salespeople do have specific goals.

Heidi Grant Halvorson: Right.

Jill: Most people who are listening today are in the sales field. In the beginning of every year, they are assigned their quota, which might be \$500,000 or \$5 million, or whatever it is. For most sales people, it's usually a challenging goal and they kind of gulp when they hear it.

I know you say challenging goals are good but is it enough to be able to say, "It's January, my goal is \$500,000" or "it's January and my goal is \$5 million." Is that enough today?

Heidi Grant Halvorson: That's a place to start. What the research shows us becomes motivating and effective is how you think about that goal of \$500,000 or \$5 million or whatever it is. There are really two ways that are both really useful.

The first is the "why" question. "Why am I pursuing this goal?" Because it's really what's motivating. So spend some time thinking about why a goal is important and how reaching this target influence your other important goals. "Why is this important to me?" "Why is this important to my organization?" "What do I get from achieving that goal?" "How will it benefit me?"

Those are all the Why questions. The why of a goal is what makes us feel motivated. When you need a little bit of motivation, it's thinking about that Why that really gets your juices flowing.

On the other hand, you also need to think about the What. What exactly do you need to do? Again this is something that people tend to not do very naturally.

We don't naturally think about our goals and break them down into concrete actions. So we need to think in terms of What or How. "How am I going to reach that target?" "What do I need to do to get the job done?"

That allows us to be prepared for what lies ahead and to handle challenges more effectively because we've already thought it through.

Both of those levels of thinking are very important - but often people will do one and not the other.

Jill: I think the hardest thing in sales is to stay motivated because there is so much rejection and it can take so long to achieve a sale. A sales cycle might be three months or maybe eighteen months depending on what you're selling. Knowing how to stay motivated is crucial.

Heidi Grant Halvorson: Sometimes when we're bogged down with challenges, we forget the Why because we're so busy concentrating on the What. When you feel that your motivation is ebbing and you feel enthusiasm, you need to take a moment to think about your goals.

Take a moment to think Why. Take a moment to think about whether or not you're being specific. It's so incredibly powerful and yet it's something we generally don't do. We don't carve out those moments to think about what we're doing and to think about that strategically. It's really an incredibly productive tool.

Jill: I'm going to just throw in some thoughts; I had my own Why when I started the sales. Not a lot of people grew up wanting to be in sales in my time. It was looked down upon and I think many realms today still think of sales people as sleazy.

But I had a real Why in terms of why I went into sales. I had a business idea that I brought to the SCORE (Service Corp of Retired Executives). They looked at my business plan and said "This is great, Jill, but who's going to sell this?"

I was shocked and literally said "I thought you said this was a good idea!" And they said "Yes, but somebody has to sell it."

My one and only one goal when I went into sales was to figure it out so I could go back to my business idea. That was my Why!

Heidi Grant Halvorson: Right!

Jill: That got me up and running. I've told people before that I've actually fainted in sales calls from sheer terror and I had to literally pick myself up off the ground to go forward. But the reason I was able to do that was because I wanted to start my own business.

Heidi Grant Halvorson: That is such a good example of what I'm talking about. That Why that keeps us going. The challenge is that Why can very easily get lost when things are difficult. It is very natural to start concentrating on the nitty gritty, instead of the big picture.

Yet it is the big picture that keeps you going. Again, the nitty gritty is important too because it makes sure you get things done. But we have to deliberately go back and forth between the big picture and the nitty gritty. I think your story is a great example.

Jill: I've also seen salespeople who believe that what they sell has value. I mean, they truly believe what they do matters and will help their customers. That's also a Why goal.

So these salespeople stay motivated even when the same customer doesn't get back to them. They're prospecting because they know what they're doing it matters. I don't think people in sales sometimes think about that, they just think they're selling stuff.

Heidi Grant Halvorson: That's a very good point. What you do really does matter and taking time to think about what that value is is very powerful.

Jill: I'm going to share another story. When I called on Medtronic many years ago for my sales training services, I met with the Vice President of Sales for the

Neurological division. He had a picture of somebody behind him and it was a tall cut-out picture. I asked him about it.

He said "That's my customer, Jill. I just look at that person all the time and I think about the difference I'm making to his or her life."

Heidi Grant Halvorson: That's wonderful!

Jill: I was like "Whoa! This guy is motivated at a deeper level than anybody else because he's literally looking at that person the whole time."

Heidi Grant Halvorson: People pursue all different kinds of goals. Everybody wants to make more money and everybody wants to move up in power and everybody wants people to think that they are smart and talented. All of those things are very, very natural.

But it turns out that the goals that really sustain us and make us what I like to call happy with a capital H -- the happiness that is lasting and not just a momentary or quick moment.

The goals that really sustain us are those that feed into what we call the three basic human needs. One of them is the need for relatedness: to feel that you have meaningful relationships with people in your work life, your family, and your community. That you're connecting with other people. That VP of Sales you were talking about has this very real sense that he's helping real people in his community to thrive and so that feeds a much bigger need than just making a lot of money or getting lots of power.

The second type of goals that sustain us are goals where it's really about developing ourselves, learning and growing and growing in our skills. That's also fundamental.

The last one is autonomy feeling, which feeling like the things you do reflect something about you, your values, something about who you are, and that you're making choices that reflect those values and who you are.

Again, the VP of Sales is a great example of someone who's connecting what they're doing in sales with how it helps other people and how it's a reflection of his values. That's going to be very powerful Why that keeps him going when things are very, very challenging.

Jill: Do those sorts of goals develop more over time? Because I think when you're new into a profession like sales, especially when there's the leader board and everyone sees how you're doing, it can be really intimidating. I think when you're new, your goal might be just to "make it."

Heidi Grant Halvorson: To survive.

Jill: To survive! But, if you can survive and achieve that quota, you start to think about what's next. Is that normal... do goals evolve over time?

Heidi Grant Halvorson: They do. In the beginning, I think especially when you are afraid, when you're facing something new or when the goals are very challenging and the goals are new in the water and the learning curve is very steep, it's very, very natural for people to be very focused on surviving, hitting the target. That's all that matters.

The problem with that goal is that it really doesn't allow people to reach their full potential. In the book, I call it the "Be Good Mindset," where all you're trying to do is be good to prove to yourself and other people that you have what it takes. You see your work as - in a way - a test of that goodness. Am I smart? Am I talented? Am I a good sales person? Do I have what it takes?

I think that as we grow in experience, some of us start to feel like that's not a good way to be. The research suggests that's really very true. The vastly better way to think about the goals we pursue is about getting better rather than being good.

It is about growing in your skills, developing yourself, figuring out what you want to do and how you can develop and grow over time. Instead of constantly thinking "Am I smart enough? Am I creative enough? Am I good enough in sales?"

The focus becomes "How can I get smarter? How can I get more creative? How can I get better at sales?"

In sales, it's hard to have a Get Better mindset because you have quotas and rankings; you're constantly being evaluated in very concrete terms.

When I work with people in sales, I emphasize taking a longer view, "Yes, I have to hit this quota, but overall I should think about it as a process, as a journey of developing my skills rather than constantly proving that I have them."

There's lots of research showing that when people are focused on getting better, rather than being good, they outperform their peers. They also enjoy what they do more, find it more interesting, are more creative, think more deeply, plan more effectively and tend to take on persistent challenges. They're still pursuing the same goals, but with a different mindset.

You might think sales would be one area where this would be less true. Sales is so focused on very specific quotas and targets and ranking. It's easy to think "How can I have a Get Better mindset when I know that I have to hit X amount of sales in a quarter or over the course of a year?"

What we know is that it is actually possible. Again, taking the long view: "Yes I have to hit this quota, but my long view is what I'm trying to become a sales person."

There's one really cool study that followed a group of individuals selling medical equipment over the course of a year. In the beginning of the year, the researchers measure mindsets by asking: "When it comes to sales do you agree with statements like 'I'm trying to prove that I'm a good salesperson' or 'Sometimes I feel like I'm being judged about whether or not I have what it takes' or do you agree more with things like 'It's very important for me to be developing and growing in my sales skills?'"

The salespeople who were really focused on developing and growing vastly outperformed salespeople who were just focused on being good in sales over the course of the year.

It boiled down to three things: they put in more effort, they planned more effectively, and they actually set higher goals for themselves.

Even though these salespeople had a particular quota, they were more willing to challenge themselves.

The idea of failing is less frightening when you're focused on getting better. You feel a certain comfort with a challenge when your focus is "I'm trying to get better over time" rather than "I have to be good right now". When you're just trying to prove you're

good, challenges are very terrifying. They can undermine you and make you feel very vulnerable.

But when your focus is on getting better, challenges actually help you to achieve that goal. They teach you things.

It sounds like a very subtle shift in thinking but it turns out to be very powerful. Shifting your thinking lets you have your cake and eat it too. You end up more productive and actually more able to enjoy the work and find value in it much more effectively.

Jill: You're not stressed out as much either.

Heidi Grant Halvorson: Much less. We relate it to lower levels of anxiety and lower levels of depression. It's probably the single most powerful strategy we've found for shifting the way in which people work.

Jill: It's so interesting to say this. For years I've said to people "It's not about if you're cut out for sales or not. You just haven't learned how yet." You have to keep saying to yourself, "I'm learning. I don't know how yet and I need to figure it out."

Heidi Grant Halvorson: You have just said my favorite addition to a sentence: "yet". I run into this all the time. People saying "I'm not a math person, I'm not a technology person, maybe I'm not cut out for sales."

We buy into those notions that there are math people and not math people. That there are salespeople and not salespeople. It's just simply not true.

It's really just a way we've come to think about the nature of ability: some people have it and some people don't.

But the data is very clear on this point, it's just not true. There is no gene for sales. There are no math genes. The thing about math, technology, and sales is that they're complicated.

To be good at any of these things really requires you to have a lot of knowledge and to learn to use that knowledge in complex ways. So the people who are good at it are the people who stick around, the people who keep trying and don't give up on themselves too soon.

Jill: I was giving a speech a few years ago and the day before the speech, the CEO of the company actually said to me," Jill, I've got a young sales audience, you know people who have been in sales two to three years. Some are even newer. Rather than giving your usual speech, would you just talk about your first couple years in sales?"

What I reflected on that, I was thinking about how much fear and failure I had initially in my job: I was scared that I wasn't going to be able to do it. If I accomplished one goal, I was afraid I wasn't going to meet the next one. "I could meet my monthly quota in July but would I meet it in August?"

Every month was like that and what I came to realize that my ability to keep going kept me in the game long enough to get better and to succeed. That's just what you're saying.

Heidi Grant Halvorson: Absolutely, and it is that way across the board. What's funny is I remember back when I was one of those really good students in school, one of those who drove everyone else crazy. I thought that I was really good in school because I was smart. I was that kid that would do all of the things they had to do; I would start my homework as soon as I got home. If a book report took three weeks to do I would start it right away, I made studying my number one absolute priority, and when I didn't understand something, I would seek help. I would ask the teacher, I would ask for more help, I persisted and I realized this.

And it's really funny because people will say to you, "Oh you're such a gifted sales person." What they don't realize what it took to get you there, taking all the right actions when things were difficult.

I realized it wasn't because I was smart. It wasn't because I had the school genes. There are no school genes! It was the actions that get you there. And there are actions that will get in your way. Persistence is always a big part of the answer. The people who hang in there are the ones who are successful.

If you look at the story of just about anybody who became very successful in their field, it is always a story of challenge, challenge, challenge. Things didn't go so well but I hung in there and then. That's always the answer.

Jill: Let's keep talking about that. A lot of people fail once, fail twice, and they think it's over. One of the things you talk about is failure. You say in one of your books most of us blame our failures on the wrong things. I think that's a fascinating statement. Can you expand on that?

Heidi Grant Halvorson: Sure. The number one thing that people blame their failures on (in the West) is a lack of ability. It has a lot to do with the culture we grow up in. We're fascinated by prodigies and we're fascinated by the gifted.

It's just how we explain success and so therefore it's how we explain failure. So the number one thing people do - which I think is one of the worst things they do for themselves - is say "Well, I guess I don't have what it takes" when something is difficult or doesn't come to them easily.

They blame it on a lack of ability. They believe ability is innate and so you can't get more of it. This is just wrong.

We also sometimes blame our failures on willpower. That can be true, but it's actually much less true than you think. It turns out that the real pitfalls of goal pursuit, of trying to reach any goal, are not necessarily the obvious ones.

The pitfalls tend to be things like not being specific about what you need to do to reach your goal. My favorite example is if trying to lose weight because everyone can relate to that. Too often, people will make a plan and then say "Oh, well I'll just eat less and I'll exercise more."

Jill: That sounds good.

Heidi Grant Halvorson: Right? But what's less, and of what, and how much less? What will you eat instead and what kind of exercise, and when and where? How much? Because we don't tend to think about the actions we need to take at that level, then we don't end up taking them.

A big part of why we fail to reach our goals is just not thinking about the actions we need to take. Then we miss opportunities to take them.

Everybody has said "I meant to work out today, but I didn't have time." or "I meant to return that phone call, but I didn't have time." It feels true when you say that. I mean, I've said it because it feels true.

What's actually more accurate most of the time, is you had time but you just chose to do something else with it. And you weren't massively consciously aware you were making that choice.

We're constantly missing opportunities to act on our goals; we're not making the best use of our time. We're getting distracted and we're juggling too many goals at once and we're not working on the ones we should be working on.

Our failures are mostly about those two things and giving up too soon. We close doors on ourselves far too readily. We should really be hanging in there and giving ourselves a chance.

We're impatient. We need to give ourselves a chance to learn something and a chance to be good at it. Again there's this sense that if something doesn't come easily, then it's not for you. That couldn't be further from the truth.

I have a very good friend who's a brilliant mathematician - and she failed calculus the first time she took it. She loves to tell everyone that story because many of her students are terrified of math. So she says "Well, if I failed it and became a PhD in math, then I'm pretty sure you can manage it too."

That's the truth. It's just simply not true that people who are very good at things got there by being naturally gifted. In general it's true that they've had a lot of ups and downs, but they've learned from them.

Jill: That's cool. I have one last question that I would like to ask to continue this theme. In your book "Succeed" you talk about the power and the peril of positive thinking. In fact, you say "So if it's a good thing to think you'll succeed, surely it must be good to imagine yourself easily avoiding temptations and obstacles."

Heidi Grant Halvorson: Right.

Jill: But right after that you say "No, that's not true."

Heidi Grant Halvorson: I think one of the hardest things about motivation and success is that our intuitions about them can be pretty terrible. So, when an idea is out there like the Law of Attraction or the Secret, where if you believe positive things the universe will manifest them.

There are a lot of people who talk about these ideas. "Cross the word 'impossible' out of your vocabulary, think only positive thoughts, imagine yourself succeeding easily." Then that's what's going to happen... there's a sort of intuitive appeal to that kind of thinking.

It seems like it should work and I wish it did. Really, I think that would be great! But, unfortunately it doesn't work for two reasons.

If you are only positive thinking, when difficult things happen, when challenges happen, when you have set backs, when you get negative feedback, then you are completely unprepared. You have done zero thinking about and there's no Plan B. You've done Best Case Scenario planning and have given no thought to how you'll handle challenges. People tend to just completely fall apart when that happens. There's a lack of realism about what's going to happen to you when you're pursuing a goal.

We've done studies where you measure physiological factors like heart rate, and blood pressure, and how much cortisol is in their blood. Then we look at what happens when people just think positive thoughts versus realistically positive thoughts.

Realistic optimism is believing you can succeed, but believing it will be tough, you'll face challenges and it will not be an easy road. When people think only positively, we actually find that their body goes into a state that's a lot like day dreaming. Their blood pressure goes down in a bad way, their heart rate goes down, their body goes essentially into a waking sleep state. As a result, they feel less of a sensation to get up and do something and so they don't!

Whereas the people who go "I can do it but it's going to be hard so I should think about all the ways in which it's going to be hard." Their blood pressure goes up -- again in a good way, not too far up-- but their heart rate goes up and the body starts preparing itself to take action. They're much more likely to take action and be successful.

There was actually a great study about women who were morbidly obese needed to lose weight for health reasons. Those women enrolled in a program and the researcher asked them to say, "How do you think it's going to work? Do you think you're going to succeed and do you think it's going to be easy or hard?"

The people who thought they would succeed in losing weight lost 24 pounds more than the people who didn't. Then the researcher looked at the people who succeeded, and asked, "Did you think it was going to be easy? Or did you think it was going to be difficult?"

The people who thought losing weight was going to be difficult lost on average 25 pounds more than the people who thought it was going to be easy.

Again there's this sense that negative thoughts are bad. That's absolutely silly and wrong. You need to be a realist about the challenges that face you. It's not negative to say, "This is going to be hard, I may need to have a plan B, I may need to get some help from an expert... it's going to be tough going and I'll have to persist, but I believe I can succeed."

That's the key. That's the kind of positive thinking that really is important - believing in the long haul that you can do it. Believing it's going to be easy just sets you up for disappointment and ultimately keeps you from really realizing your full potential. You get derailed the moment you run into something hard because you're like "Wait a minute! This was supposed to be easy!"

Jill: The great thing is if you believe it's going to be challenging, then you're going to be prepared. If it isn't challenging, then you'll just be pleasantly surprised.

Heidi, thanks so much for your interview today. Everyone who's selling needs to hear this because sales is a challenging profession, it's not easy to do. You have really helped us understand what it takes to get to success. I truly appreciate it.

Heidi Grant Halvorson: Well, thank you so much, Jill. This was great.

Jill: My pleasure!