15: Achieving Big By Planning Small



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With Your Host

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One of the advantages of starting a career when you're young is that you don't really think about how far you have to go. It seems natural and normal that you are starting something new and that there's a long way between you and your ultimate goals.

But when you're older, when you've already had success in an established career or you've already got a few different jobs under your belt, you start to become more aware of the gap between being a beginner and being an expert or being experienced or having built something more substantial because now you've done that in another area, and so you're actually aware of the ground there is to travel.

And that can become a problem because our perfectionist brains tell us that we should have already gotten to where we need to go, that the journey is too far, that we can't see how we'll get from where we are to where we want to go. And I see this come up with new coaches quite a lot or even coaches who are already established and are trying to achieve a new goal that will blow their mind.

And so I wanted to share this episode that I first released on my other podcast, Unf*ck Your Brain, because it's all about how you can create and achieve something big and mind-blowing and life-changing and monumental by starting small and learning to embrace taking small steps and starting small as a means to achieving something big that will blow your mind is really crucial.

And there are areas of our lives where we get this, like we know if we want to run a marathon and right now we only run a mile at a time that we're going to need to build up incrementally, but we have problems sometimes when we try to apply that to more abstract or big picture accomplishments in other areas of our lives.

So, if you have ever struggled with feeling like you're too far away from your goal, with having trouble getting started because you just feel like

there's so much to do, it feels impossible, you're not sure what all the right steps are, then this episode is for you.

Welcome to *The Future Coach*, the podcast for independent coaches, in-house coaches, and the coach curious. I'm your host Kara Loewentheil, founder of The Socratic Coaching Academy. If you want to chart a new path, uplevel your skills, and build a successful career around coaching, you're in the right place. Let's go.

When you look at where I started when I became a coach, no business experience, no marketing or sales experience, no podcasting experience, no coaching experience for that matter, and you look at where I've ended up, you'd assume I had a big grand plan. But let me let you in on a little secret. I really did not. I did not have a 10-year plan.

I did not have a 5-year plan. I still don't have either of those things. And yet I've accomplished more than I ever imagined possible, and more than many people ever do. How? Why? How is that possible? It's because big grand plans and knowing every step of the way are not essential for achievement. And sometimes they're actually a detriment.

I'm going to explain why that's the case, and then I'll share the alternative structure that I use to create new outcomes. So, first, I got to do the disclaimers. I'm not saying it's bad to have a three or a five or a 10-year plan. If that's working for you, then that's great. That doesn't mean you're doing it wrong. There are also circumstances where those are essential, right? If you're running an enormous corporation, then probably you need a 3 or 5-year plan at least. You can't just build a factory overnight.

But I don't run a business like that, and a lot of you don't either. So as always, take what you need, leave the rest. If you've listened to the podcast, you know that I often talk about the importance of getting really specific about goals and the importance of setting big goals for yourself, not

just having vague aspirations that you don't even really know how you would fulfill.

And that's all true. I never recommend having a goal that's just like, I want to make more money, or I want to change how I eat. When your brain encounters vagueness, it doesn't know what to do. So usually that means it just does nothing. So specificity in a goal is important. But specificity even in a big ambitious or impossible goal is not the same as a grand 5-year plan.

Big elaborate plans can be very seductive for those of us prone to perfectionist fantasies. Quick recap of that concept, a perfectionist fantasy is when we have a goal or dream that we want to achieve because we imagine that when we do, our lives will be perfect and it will solve all of our emotional problems. These are often, though not always, accompanied by lots of detailed, complicated planning that never actually gets implemented.

For instance, you join a Pilates studio and make a complicated color-coded calendar of when you'll go to what kind of classes and you get lots of dopamine from making that calendar, and then you never actually go at all. Or you go twice, then fall off the wagon, say f*ck it, and give up. So one downside of making a big five or 10-year plan is that we can actually end up substituting making the plan for taking any action.

We get a bunch of dopamine from planning everything out and then we don't do any of it. Especially because it seems like we have plenty of time. There's no reason to start right away. We'll get to doing the plan eventually, right? So we get to feel like we're doing something when actually we haven't done anything. Or we plan it all out and then we subconsciously associate success with following the plan.
So the minute life intervenes and we don't do it perfectly, we now feel hopeless and like we've ruined everything. A lot of black and white thinking at play. All of a sudden we're behind, even on a long-term plan, and now we'll never catch up, so we just stop trying. Alternatively, sometimes what

happens when we think we need a big plan or a big detailed strategy is that because we can't figure out what it should be and every step, we don't do anything.

So that happens when we have some goal in mind and we are thinking like, that's so far away and impossible. I don't know how to get from here to there, so I'm just going to give up now. I call this one turtle on its back because that's my brain's favorite thing to do when confronted with something challenging or new, is to just say, I don't know, give up. The turtle brain problem is that we assume that we need to know exactly how to do something in order to do it. That's a totally impossible premise if you think about it.

If you're trying to do something you've never done before, obviously you don't know exactly how to do it yet. If you did know exactly what to do, you'd have done it. Whether you're trying to become someone who goes to Pilates regularly or you're trying to scale your business from seven to eight figures, the problem is the same. You do not know how to do it yet. Otherwise, you would have done it.

And yet your brain says, if I don't know how to do it, I can't do it. So you're stuck in this circular thinking you can't get out of. There's one more problem with the five or 10-year vision idea that's a little more ineffable. It's actually a tension that exists within the idea of setting ambitious or impossible goals at all. But it's also the place where growth comes from. And that's that from where we are now, we often can't even see what is possible for us.

A lot of the work we do here on this podcast and my programs is about expanding our vision of what might be possible for us. But it's always constrained by where we are now and who we are now. I don't think that's a reason to not set goals. That's an unavoidable aspect. But for me, it's always been a reason to focus more on the specific goal I want to achieve and less on a specific timeline and detailed plan of what to do.

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My big goal when I started my business was to make $150,000 in my third year of coaching. That seemed like a big ambitious goal at the time. In year one, I made $26,000, and I seemed behind. In year two, I made $200,000 and passed it, and in year three, I made $1.2 million. If I had been following a detailed plan to make exactly 50k the first year, 100k the second year, 150 the third year, I would have actually ended up holding myself back.

So believing you need a big grand plan can actually inhibit action in one of two ways. Either you make a big grand plan, but then you never actually do it, or you do a little then quit, or because you can't figure out what actually should be in the plan, you never do anything. And getting overly invested in specific long-term outcomes can actually limit your potential to achieve things you can't even imagine right now. Obviously, none of that is ideal. So I want to share how I approach goal setting and making plans after this quick break.

Okay, so if I don't have a three or five-year or 10-year plan, what am I doing? I'm setting specific goals that excite or scare me, and then I'm taking what seems like the next necessary action, even if I don't know what comes after. So let's break that down because it's really two parts. The first is that I'm sending the end result goal. That's different than a 5-year plan. It's often not time-dependent, although sometimes it is.

Even when it is time-dependent, though, it's not broken down into the exact action steps one after the other to lead all the way to the end result, which I am telling myself I can somehow see from here. So let's take the goal I had of getting my book on the New York Times bestseller list. My launch strategist told me I needed to sell 19,000 books in pre-order to make the list.

Because she was running things, and this is no shade on her, she was great, we had a specific plan of exactly how to do it, which is what I usually don't do. So that all seemed well and good in theory until I started working

on it, and then based on the first round of the pre-order campaign, it quickly seemed impossible.

So my options at that moment were to decide, well, the exact steps that we laid out in our very detailed plan aren't happening as I need them to. So now I'm behind, so now I'll never catch up, so I'm just going to despair and give up. Or I could just decide I don't believe it has to happen that way in order to happen. And that's what I did. I just decided that I didn't think it needed to be 19,000, or if it was going to be 19,000, it didn't have to happen according to this detailed plan.

And I was just going to do everything I could think of to do for next necessary actions. So that's what I did. I just kept brainstorming ideas and doing them as I went along without knowing for sure if it would all add up to what I wanted to accomplish. In the end, I actually sold quite a bit fewer than 19,000 copies pre-order, but I made the New York Times bestseller list anyway.

I had my goal in mind. It was a big audacious goal, but I wasn't married to a specific execution plan. I just did the next action I could think of that might help me get there over and over until I got there. I'm not saying I acted blindly or impulsively. I acted strategically. I thought about what would help me achieve the goal and I tried to do those things, but I didn't need to know exactly how we would get to the goal. I just had to believe I would take each next step as it came to me and keep going.

I had a similar thing happen when I was trying to scale to $5 million in my business a few years ago. I had set that goal three years in a row. The first year, I knew it was very unlikely, but I just wanted to set an impossible goal. And that year I went from $2 million to $3 million essentially. The next year I was like, okay, I'm really going to do five this year, and this is how I did hours and hours of detailed math on exactly how to get there.

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And I spent the whole year not hitting those marks, revising the math over and over, getting swamped in the details. We did not make $5 million that year. I think we did 3.5, so we didn't really go that much above the previous year. Finally, the third attempt, I remembered I was a mindset coach and not an Excel spreadsheet strategist.

I stopped doing the math and I just focused on believing that we would make $5 million and doing the next things I could think of. And that year we made $5 million for the first time. Because I remembered that I didn't need to know exactly how I was going to do it. I needed to know I was becoming the person who did it, and that as I went along the path, I was going to learn what I needed to know, have new ideas, see new opportunities, and get better at becoming that person each time I took the action.

You can call it trusting the process, you can call it not needing to know the how, you can call it having faith in your future self, you can call it focusing on the thought line, not the action line. A lot of different ways of saying that you don't need to know exactly how you're going to create an outcome in order to get started. And in fact, it's often impossible to know how you'll do it from the starting line.

If I had told myself when I was deciding to go to my coach certification that I needed to have an entire business plan and know exactly how I was going to make a success of the career and what that would look like and believe that was all possible on day one, I would never have set foot in that door. But I didn't tell myself I needed that.

I just told myself that I knew I wanted to become a coach, and I'd keep taking the next action that presented itself on the journey to getting there. And the rest, as they say, is history. So if you have a goal you want to achieve, if you have a dream you've been putting off because you have perfect plans you don't follow, or you just can't even imagine what the plan would be, this is your loving call in.

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You do not need to know how you'll get there. You just need to start the process and the how will reveal itself as you move along. It's impossible to know it ahead of time. It hasn't been created yet.