

The Goals Grid

A Versatile, Multi-Purpose Tool

Fred Nickols

8/8/2011



A thoughtful analysis reveals that there are only four basic categories of goals and objectives: Achieve, Preserve, Avoid and Eliminate. Those four categories make up a framework known as The Goals Grid. This framework offers an extremely versatile and multi-purpose tool for use in setting, clarifying, evaluating goals and objectives and in making certain that all the bases are covered. This article sets forth the framework known as The Goals Grid and illustrates its many uses and applications.

The Goals Grid: A Versatile, Multi-Purpose Tool

Goals and goal-setting are integral and important parts of life at work. They are also important parts of our personal lives. Any tool that makes our goals and our goal-setting efforts better is worth a look. If it's simple, versatile, easy to use, and really works, it's worth much more than a look. This paper presents just such a tool: the Goals Grid.

The Goals Grid is based on the following premise:

Goals are conditions we envision as part of our future. Any conceivable condition can be examined from two perspectives: (1) whether or not we want it and (2) whether or not we have it. We can, then, ask two questions in relation to any possible condition (i.e., "goal"):

1. Do we want it?
2. Do we have it?

Both questions are answerable Yes or No and the interplay of these Yes or No answers gives rise to four categories of goals (see Figure 1):

- I. *Achieve Goals* (conditions we want but don't have)
- II. *Preserve Goals* (conditions we want and currently have)
- III. *Avoid Goals* (conditions we don't want and don't have)
- IV. *Eliminate Goals* (conditions we have but don't want)

Do We Have It?	No	I Achieve	III Avoid
	Yes	II Preserve	IV Eliminate
		Yes	No
		Do We Want It?	

Figure 1 – The Goals Grid

Applications of the Goals Grid

The Goals Grid has proven its usefulness in a wide range of settings – from operational planning to strategic planning; as a framework for generating goals and as a framework for analyzing them; as a way of identifying client or customer needs and a structure for analyzing them. It can be applied directly to goals and it can be applied to actions being contemplated. It can be used for personal and for professional purposes. In short, it is an extremely versatile tool. Seven illustrative applications of the Goals Grid are described next.

The Goals Grid: A Versatile, Multi-Purpose Tool

Generating Goals. One of the more fundamental uses of the Goals Grid is as a framework for generating goals in all four quadrants or categories.

The completed Goals Grid shown in Figure 2 shows a set of goals generated by a board of commissioners during a strategic planning session. These were subsequently reviewed, refined and incorporated into the commission’s strategic plan.

		No	DO YOU HAVE IT?	Yes		
DO YOU WANT IT?	Yes	Achieve		Preserve		
	No	Avoid		Eliminate		
		No	DO YOU HAVE IT?	Yes	DO YOU WANT IT?	

Yes

No

DO YOU WANT IT?

DO YOU WANT IT?

Figure 2 – A Board of Commissioners’ Goals Grid

The Goals Grid: A Versatile, Multi-Purpose Tool

Classifying and Analyzing Goals. Another basic use of the Goals Grid is as a tool for classifying and analyzing a set of goals (especially those that were not created using the Goals Grid).

Figure 3 shows some goals set by the CEO of a \$500M non-profit organization. Slotting them into the Goals Grid framework reveals some interesting aspects of this CEO’s goals. For instance, the only goal that ties to people is the one of reducing benefits. The absence of any goals in the Avoid quadrant suggests there appears to be nothing significant that the CEO wishes to avoid (or perhaps he’s overlooking or unaware of something). And, his focus is clearly on financials.

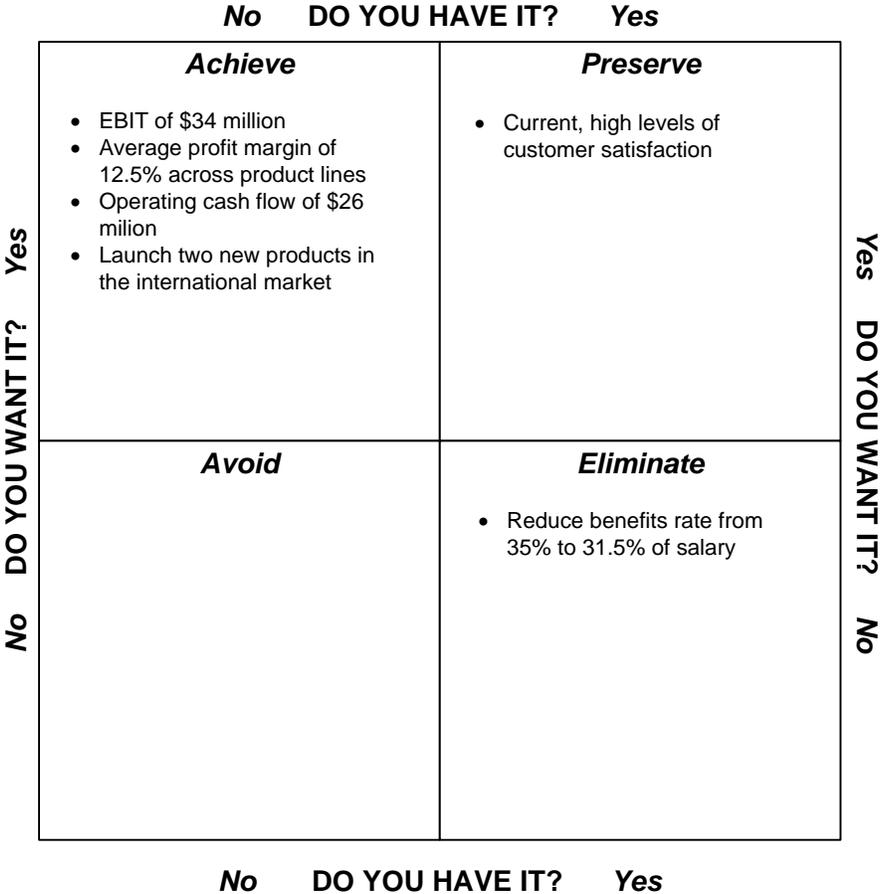


Figure 3 – A CEO’s Goals

Identifying Needs and Requirements. An especially productive business use of the Goals Grid framework is to provide a framework for thinking about customer or client needs and requirements.

Consider the following questions asked in relation to customers or clients, either in general or in relation to particular clients or customers:

- What is it they want but don’t have (achieve)?
- What do they have they’d like to keep (preserve)?
- What are the things they’d like to avoid?
- What would they like to get rid of (eliminate)?

The Goals Grid: A Versatile, Multi-Purpose Tool

These and similar questions can be extremely useful in identifying likely customer or client needs and requirements and then in figuring out sales and marketing strategies to satisfy them. These same questions can also be useful in negotiations as a way of getting a fix on what the parties to the negotiation are after.

Examining Contemplated Actions. One of the most important uses of the Goals Grid and its underlying conceptual framework is as a tool in examining the dimensions and implications of a proposed course of action.

Consider Company A which is considering merging with Company B. In thinking through this possible merger, the following set of questions should prove extremely useful:

As a result of acquiring Company B and merging the two companies into one...

1. What is it we hope to achieve?
2. What is it we wish to preserve?
3. What should we take care to avoid?
4. What, if anything, should we work to eliminate?

Exploring Strategic Issues. Yet another use of the Goals Grid and its conceptual framework is as a way of exploring strategic issues.

The CEO of a \$1.2B high-tech company posed nine questions related to what he saw as strategic issues facing the company. The questions were posed to the roughly 80 senior execs who lead the firm. The nine questions were each framed in the context of a Goals Grid analysis and all nine were worked by groups of the execs during a one and one-half day strategic thinking session. One of the CEO's questions dealt with his company's identity. As he posed it, it read as follows:

"What is our corporate identity? What do we want to be?"

Reframed in the context of the Goals Grid framework, the CEO's question took the following form in the working session:

As we set about shaping our corporate identity and culture:

- What are the qualities or characteristics we want for our company but don't have (Achieve)?
- What are the qualities or characteristics we already have and want to keep (Preserve)?
- What are the qualities or characteristics we don't currently have and don't want in the future (Avoid)?
- Which, if any, of our current qualities or characteristics can we do without (Eliminate)?

A similar reframing was performed on the other eight questions. Needless to say, the day and a half session generated a great deal of useful information for the CEO and his executive team about the nine strategic issues facing the company.

Interviewing Candidates for Employment, Promotions or New Positions. Another interesting use of the Goals Grid is as a framework for conducting interviews in relation to employment, promotion or assignment to a new position.

For an existing employee applying for a new position, a useful segment of an interview might take the following form:

"Presumably you know something about the position, its role in the department and its contribution to our larger organization. Presumably, you also know something about the challenges facing the person who holds that position. So, let's assume you are selected for the position. As the new incumbent, tell

The Goals Grid: A Versatile, Multi-Purpose Tool

me about four kinds of goals you might set: (1) those things you would set out to achieve; (2) those things you might try to preserve; (3) those conditions you would make sure to avoid; and (4) anything you might view as desirable to eliminate.”

For a prospective new-hire, a similar portion of an interview might look like the following:

“Goal setting and attainment are important factors in a successful career in our company. We like to ask prospective employees to tell us about their goals. More specifically, we like to hear about four categories of goals. So please tell me about past or current goals where you’ve set out to bring about conditions in these four categories: (1) goals in which you achieved something that didn’t before exist; (2) goals in which you were careful to preserve something that already existed; (3) goals where you took steps to avoid some undesirable condition and (4) goals in which you got rid of or eliminated some undesirable, existing condition.”

The precise wording of the questions can be tailored to suit the interviewer, the interview and the interviewee. The flexibility of wording also applies to other uses of the Goals Grid. The important thing to keep in mind is that the underlying framework of the Goals Grid allows you to examine all possible types of conditions that might form the basis for a goal.

Personal Use. Finally, one of the best uses of the Goals Grid is as a tool for thinking about, formulating and clarifying your personal goals. All you have to do is start making notes in four categories: Achieve, Preserve, Avoid and Eliminate. Or, if you prefer, there is a job aid at the end of this paper you can use for that purpose.

Some Benefits of Using the Goals Grid

The list of benefits below reflects the experiences and insights of managers, clients, consultants and other users of the Goals Grid (e.g., people who came across it and simply picked it up and used it).

- *clarifies the many dimensions and implications* of a proposed course of action
- helps ensure *comprehensive coverage* in a set of goals (i.e., exposes gaps or holes)
- provides *an organized way of thinking* through an issue
- *reveals potential conflict* between our own goals and between our goals and the goals of others
- *reveals patterns* in goals that might be important
- *helps head off unintended consequences* as a consequence of more thoroughly examining all aspects of contemplated actions
- *adapts easily* to a variety of uses
- provides an extremely effective overall *organizational analysis tool* for participants of strategic and long-range planning workshops
- provides a *visible format* that workshop participants can continuously refer to when developing the strategic direction and goals for their organization
- provides an *effective method for developing group consensus* regarding desired future conditions for the organization
- follows a *logical progression of thought* for goal development and decision making (i.e., achieve, preserve, avoid and eliminate)
- useful as a *discussion generator* for an analysis of current services, products, programs and direction of the organization (preserve and eliminate)

The Goals Grid: A Versatile, Multi-Purpose Tool

- provides a *quick check of the alignment of values* – individual and organizational – among the work session participants (conflicts and consensus)
- offers advantages over conventional flip chart lists of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats because of the *simplicity and usefulness of the information generated*
- reviewing individual responses and the associated group discussion can lead to a *consensual, agreed-to set of responses* to enter into the organization’s “strategic” Goals Grid
- *facilitates comparing the “fit”* between a completed Goals Grid for an organization and one prepared for a single goal, project, program or decision
- most of all, The Goals Grid provides a basis for a very *effective, practical, engaging, and efficient activity* for an organization’s board, committee, task force or project team to use in the course of strategic planning

The Goals Grid Job Aid

At the end of this paper you will find a blank version of the Goals Grid which you can use as a job aid when setting, clarifying and analyzing goals. As pointed out in this paper, the Goals Grid is also useful in exploring the many dimensions and implications of any actions you might be contemplating.

About the Author

Fred Nickols is the creator of the Goals Grid and the managing partner of Distance Consulting, LLC. He is a prolific writer and a seasoned consultant with several years of executive-level experience. He specializes in improving the performance and productivity of people, processes and organizations. His areas of interest include change management, strategy, process improvement, and knowledge work to name a few. His many papers and articles can be found at his articles web site: www.skullworks.com. His consulting web site can be found at www.nickols.us. Fred can be reached via email at fred@nickols.us.

The Goals Grid: A Job Aid

A goal is a condition we envision as part of our future. We can ask two questions about such a condition: (1) Do we have it? And (2) Do we want it? Both questions are answerable Yes or No. The interplay between these two questions and their Yes or No answers yields four more questions that are helpful in setting and clarifying goals:

- What is it you want but don't currently have (What do you want to **achieve**)?
- What is it you want and currently have (What do you want to **preserve**)?
- What is it you don't want and don't currently have (What do you want to **avoid**)?
- What is it you don't want but currently have (What do you want to **eliminate**)?

You can also use the Goals Grid to clarify the conditions meant to result from actions being contemplated (e.g., "What is it we want to achieve, preserve, avoid and eliminate as a result of restructuring division X or department Y?"). Use **The Goals Grid Job Aid** below to jot down your thoughts about your goals or actions then start refining them.

		No	DO YOU HAVE IT?	Yes
DO YOU WANT IT?	Yes	<i>Achieve</i>	<i>Preserve</i>	<i>Preserve</i>
	No	<i>Avoid</i>	<i>Eliminate</i>	<i>Eliminate</i>
		No	DO YOU HAVE IT?	Yes