

YOUR RANGE OF EXPECTATIONS

As part of the goal-setting process, it's wise to give yourself a range of expectations. It's like going to a car wash where there is a range of services to choose from—do you want the Basic, the BasicPlus, or the Super wash? As a young rower my Basic goal during selection was to make the team; I'd be okay with that. The BasicPlus goal that I would have been happy with was to be a leader in the eight. My Super goal, the great one, was to be the top starboard and in the pair with Kathleen.

You don't perform in a vacuum, and your abilities vary from day to day. The point of preparation and training is to minimize the variation, but there will always be standout great days, when giving more seems easy; average to good days; and bad days. This is also true of your competitors or teammates. Understanding that your performance can be any combination of these variations will help you perform at your optimal level for that day. Someone else may have the best result, or worst, of his or her career, and there is nothing you can do about that.

Before every race, to give us a realistic idea of what to expect, my coach, my rowing partner, and I would use the real data of our skills and speed versus those of the competition to create a race profile prediction. We did not assume that this prediction would play out exactly, but we assumed that it could. At the 1989 World Championships in Bled, Yugoslavia, I was excited about racing at the senior level for the first time. Past data would have indicated to European countries that Canadian rowers shouldn't be a threat, but we were a new team and hoped to change this perception.

Based on our racing before getting to Bled, beating East Germany and Romania was improbable. Even our greatest

race wouldn't be enough to challenge them. They would have to have a really bad day for us to beat them. We could hope for that, but it was extremely unlikely.

Our data told us that we could be competitive with the West Germans, Bulgarians, and Russians. This meant that a bronze medal was possible for us. Knowing this allowed us to race smart. When the race started, we didn't panic when East Germany and Romania pulled quickly ahead. To have matched their speed and raced their type of race would have put us outside of our capabilities. It wasn't that we let them go, but we knew to keep to our race plan, which was designed to beat all the others. We knew we could do that.

We didn't win a medal, but we realized a breakthrough. We had beaten the Russians and the Bulgarians, and for the first time in many years, Canada was beating some of the "big" nations. Our fourth-place position, just 0.96 seconds off West Germany's time, proved we were becoming a legitimate threat. It was a good race and I was very proud of it, but I cannot tell you how many times I sat in my university classes the following year tapping out 0.96 on the chronograph of my Timex watch. Daydreaming and distracted from school, I went over and over everything I thought I could have done better the previous summer. Just one second faster—argh! I was left so hungry for more; I felt its power.

If we had tried to keep up with the East Germans, it's very likely that we would have ended up fifth or sixth. Keeping our expectations in a realistic range let us make the most of our capabilities.

A realistic range of expectations can be very high, if you're very confident. When I meet someone who doesn't know that I raced at the Olympics, my favourite response to the inevitable

question “How did you do?” is a modest-sounding “I did as well as I could have expected.” Most people then assume that I came tenth, or worse. They say that they still think it’s pretty cool that at least I had the experience of going to the Olympics, and then they change the subject. On one occasion, someone followed up with me after doing some research: “You lied to me. You won at the Olympics!” With a big grin I replied, “I didn’t lie. I expected to win.”

SETTING A REALISTIC STANDARD OF COMPARISON

There is a responsibility that comes with being a leader and deciding on goals for a group. In team and group situations it’s not simply about each person’s wants and needs. A leader needs to set goals and communicate to the group how those goals can be achieved. Getting a whole group to accept the same goal is a skill. Getting them all to want or even be passionate for it—that is an art.

To achieve group buy-in, a leader who is defining goals for a group must let the group know by what standards they will be judged. If they are being asked to believe in and strive for more, how will they know if they have achieved their goal? Not everything is measurable. How do you judge if you are a better teacher, or parent, or nurse? Is the comparison to another person, company, or country? The more clearly the image of that success is defined, the easier it is for a group to collectively see themselves creating and following a path to achieve it.

The 2010 Canadian Olympic Team had a sexy goal: be the best nation at the Winter Olympics. For the team to be successful required a collective performance from all of the athletes, in all of the events in which they were entered. To be

the nation with the highest number of medals was a tough goal. It would require Canada to have a best-ever Olympic result, but the team's leaders declared it anyway. Team leaders believed that a bold goal would convey a strength, confidence, and swagger that previous Canadian teams had lacked. The leaders based their aggressive goal setting on the collective goal setting of each sports team and their own goals to create the team goal.

At the previous Winter Games, in 2006, Germany had been the top nation (defined by total medals), with 29 Olympic medals. The United States and Canada had won 25 and 24, respectively. In 2009, the pre-Olympic year, Canada topped the charts, having won 29 World Championship medals. Germany and the United States both won 28.

The 29-medal total from the 2009 World Championships was considered to be a collection of mostly good but not necessarily great results. In some events, Canadian athletes had disappointing results; expected medallists did not achieve their personally set goals. There were also unexpected medals in other events. At that time, the leaders from each sport were polled about their expectations for Vancouver in 2010. Based on those results, a total of 29 to 34 medals was probable. Considering that the high count in 2006 was 29, if Canada's athletes had another year of good results, "owning the podium" was a legitimate goal. Great results would be nice but not required.

Being the top nation was a big sexy goal that inspired all involved to try for more. In the end, the Canadian team didn't achieve its target. It is unwise to think that anything but great will do in an Olympic year. Those five rings are special, and people always rise up and do more. No one had predicted the United States would have its greatest Games ever, winning 37 medals. Germany won 30 medals, and Canada "only" 27.

All the same, Canadians could claim a different victory after Canadian athletes won an unprecedented 14 gold medals in 2010, making Canada the winningest host nation in Winter Olympic history.

Goal setting for the Canadian Olympic Team in 2008 had been a completely different story. The goal was to place in the top sixteen at the Summer Games in Beijing. This meant the Canadian team, as a collective, would need to do all this:

- Stay ahead of Bulgaria, Brazil, and Poland in the medal count.
- Do better than Cuba, Ukraine, Holland, Spain, Romania, Hungary, Greece, and Belarus. (Historically these countries have had similar results or slightly better team results than Canada.)
- Ignore the collective results of teams from Australia, Germany, Japan, France, Italy, Great Britain, and Korea. (These countries normally win 40 to 60 medals at each Olympic Games.)
- Ignore the team results of the United States, China, and Russia; they win 60 to 100 medals each, and Canada historically wins about 20.

As a team goal it was realistic but hard. It required the same type of collection of good and great results. It was hardly a sexy or inspiring goal for the leaders to pitch to the sports and athletes, let alone one for a nation to buy into. But it was the appropriate goal to set.

At the previous Summer Games, the 2004 Olympics in Athens, Canada had placed nineteenth, winning just 12 medals. For the Canadian summer team to have the same goal as its winter team—top nation—would have been reckless and extremely unrealistic.

The team's target—top sixteen—was made clear. Coaches and athletes were briefed about what to expect. They were not to compare themselves to the United States, China, and Russia, which would be winning medals and hearing their anthems played every day. Each athlete and each sport team were supported in the pursuit of their individual goals; some goals included medals, but many didn't.

After a collection of good, bad, and great days, the 2008 Beijing Olympics came to a close. Team Canada had achieved its goal: athletes had won 18 medals, and the team placed fourteenth in the medal standings. It might not have been sexy, but because it was framed as a success, fourteenth place was celebrated.

By setting clear definitions of what the team's goals were and what would be considered a success, the team was able to manage expectations, celebrate its victories, and avoid the frustration and disappointment that could have come with irresponsible predictions.

The team's future planning must eventually include competing with those nations that are winning 30, 40, 60, and even 100 medals. Observing and integrating their winning strategies could help Canada win more medals in the future. But to expect to jump from 12, 18, or 20 medals to 60 or more in a single four-year cycle is just not realistic.

DEFINING CLEAR GOALS

Clear goals should be:

- Inclusive. Participants who have had input into goal setting are more likely to buy in and understand what is wanted.