

Goal Focused Communication for a Productive and Happy Workplace

How to manage the daily whirlwind of information,
foster joyful productivity and regain peace of mind

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Introduction

Every day we face a whirlwind of topics and messages that makes us switch contexts all the time. The way we communicate has become incredibly messy. The onslaught of information through a multitude of channels affects our focus, reduces our productivity and creates stress. There must be a better way to work and communicate. Below I argue that we can simplify our communication by making it more goal oriented and that ‘Goal Focused Communication’ is fundamental for a happy and productive workplace.

Communication used to be plain and simple. At the end of the last millennium (not so long ago) people would just talk to each other face to face or on the phone, or they would write up their messages and stories in letters, articles and books, for others to digest and comment on at a later time. This is pretty much all we did back then and all routines were well established.

The written medium (book, article, letter) called for a certain care and thoughtfulness in how the message was formulated. This was in part because it took some serious physical effort to maneuver the written word first into the hands of the receiver (print and distribute) and then into his mind (sit down, tune out and read). So extra effort invested into upgrading the quality of the content did not change the overall energy expenditure a whole lot.

Nobody called the old style of communicating ‘asynchronous’ back then, but that's what it was.

Replying to the written word was also slow and somewhat cumbersome (send a letter - write a critique). But again, that just meant that the extra effort required to raise the quality of the response was not a major part of the overall time and effort required. So responses were naturally more thoughtful, especially compared to today's sloppy emails, chat messages, Slack- and MS-Teams channel messages, Telegram Feeds, tweets, WhatsApp DMs... only to touch on a few of the messaging-media we use today.

The big difference with today's asynchronous communication is: it used to be really slow, but the content was assembled with more care.

With the explosion of email and SMS 20 years ago, things started to speed up quite dramatically. Communicating asynchronously became easy, dirt cheap and fast as light. Like most innovations, in some ways this was a leap forward and in other ways, it was a terrible regression.

The amount of “to and fro” went up, but the quality of the content degraded.

Asynchronous communication was edging more towards real-time communication which made things more lively; but as a side effect, it also increased the number of topics and projects we engage in at any given time.

The daily whirlwind of communication we are confronted with today, can often swell up to a mental tornado. This alone could be a major cause of the burn-out and workplace disengagement epidemic we are witnessing today.

We may communicate faster, but the content is more often than not just a fragmented careless shallow mess. This has to change.

I will suggest three practices and habits that can help us to get back to sanity.

- **Increase clarity** about what we are doing, by investing more effort into defining clear Goals and overall clear Goal Structures.
- **Avoid too much context switching** by focusing on a very small number of goals at any given time.
- Structure our communication based on our goals by **making the goal name the subject line of our messages.**

Start with Clear Goals

A clear goal structure will prevent a productivity mess. You can do this with any tool, but Goalscape makes it really easy to build a clear structure goals because it is visual, as opposed to list managers (or worse, spreadsheets) where goals are easily lost in abstract digital oblivion.

In Goalscape, each goal has a location in the finite space of the Goalscape goal map: the circle that represents the finite resources we have available.

A Goalscape clearly displays the **progress** (none, partial or complete) as well as the **relative importance** of each goal.

When defining goals, each should have someone assigned as Responsible for achieving the goal. You can also set a Due date.

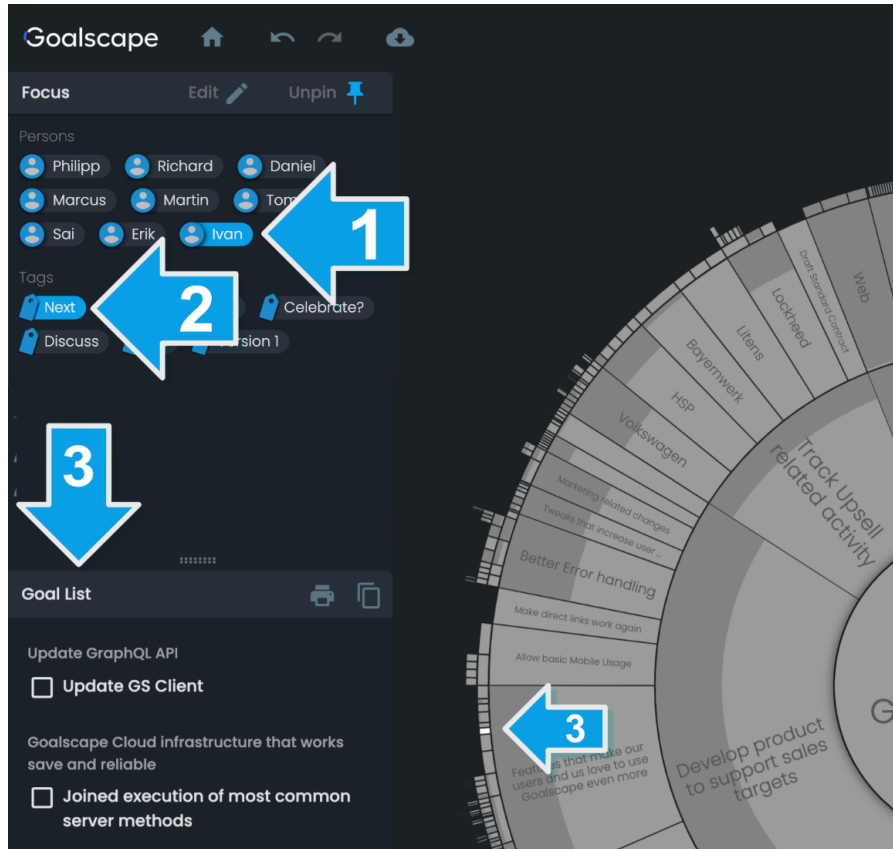
Once you have completed your structure, you need to decide what to focus on NOW and NEXT. This is the antidote to too much context switching.

Narrow Focus to Reduce Context Switching

If a goal structure is defined down to daily goals or even tasks, any team member can easily end up being responsible for more than 30 goals. To narrow this down, we label goals with the tags NOW and NEXT. We try to avoid having more than 15 goals with a NEXT tag for each person, and not more than three goals with a NOW tag per person. In our experience, having only one or two NOW tags per person works really well.

When we run weekly or bi-weekly goal-reviews, we select a person in the Focus Panel on the left (see arrow 1 below) and we select the NOW tag. In case the goals with a NOW tag are achieved, we celebrate that win.

Then we select the NEXT tag (see arrow 2 below) and review the list of NEXT goals to pinpoint a new NOW goal. This exercise keeps us in touch with the overall goal structure and keeps the main goal in mind.



Often new goals arise; and they can seem more important than existing ones. This systemic error is called recency-bias and it can easily distract us from what we had set out to do. To avoid recency bias, it is helpful to see what we had already defined as NEXT.

Once we decide which NEXT goal to tackle NOW, we change the NEXT tag to a NOW tag.

This review process is also a good opportunity to identify new goals for our NEXT list.

All this is best done in person with the relevant stakeholders. With a clear goal structure in place however, we can also do it asynchronously.

As mentioned above, asynchronous communication can lead to context switching on the receiver's end. A clear subject line is the best way to keep the cost of context switching low. Coming up with a clear subject line is not trivial though, and in today's communication cacophony, subject lines are often compromised, which forces the receiver to invest time into a forensic analysis into what a message is all about – and if it is relevant and actionable at all.

Subject Lines Matter – Make the Goal Name your Subject Line

Finding a good subject line for a message has always been a challenge. There was an unintended upside to a bad email subject line though: it ensured that the thread was doomed to die, eventually disappearing from our inbox, not bothering us any further after it had spiraled out of control with too many irrelevant comments seeping into it.

Despite that though, there was still too much email. So 'email etiquette' was invented to save the day – and initially it held a lot of promise.

My favorite rule was to write less email in the first place and instead talk to people, which miraculously ;-) led to less email. Additionally, writing thoughtful emails, choosing the subject lines and recipients wisely also helped to bring order to the chaos.

But just as things seemed to become manageable, as people learned to use the new guns properly... entirely new messaging services came into existence.

Messengers like Whatsapp[®] (or Facebook Messenger[®]) and later Slack[®] or MS Teams[®] invaded our digital spaces with groups and channels to attend to.

With such services, finding a good group- or channel-name became equally challenging to finding a good subject line for an email. Unlike email though, bad subject lines or group names would not lead to the death of the channel. Instead they would zombify and become about everything from bad jokes to rude rants with the occasional terse request to create a separate channel for the BS.

Once someone ends up in such a group or channel, it does not require a whole lot of peer pressure for people to just hang in there despite the urge to bail out. Unsubscribing (leaving) always has a little bit of a middle finger to the group, so most people stay, but then they have to start digging for the **signal in the noise**. This has become the bane of our existence today.

That is, unless the group members and the channel name have been chosen very carefully. More often than not, this goes wrong and only a fraction of the messages are important to ALL group members and it is just too hard to create a new group or channel with a meaningful name for discussions that should be branching off. People get frustrated with this: they tune out and communication breaks down. We either overload ourselves with noise and waste a lot of time on it, or we miss the important bits, which results in discussing the same thing several times before taking action (if at all). In this process, the speed advantage has been lost altogether. Maybe we have actually slowed down in getting things done.

To come to grips with the mess we run more and more meetings. The reality of many meetings today is that most attendees are also checking their phones in parallel. It is almost like the monster of fragmented asynchronous communication is feeding on itself, occupying our mind like a parasite. It is the new hamster wheel that we are locked into. Eyes fixed on a screen (large or small) - rarely looking up or into someone else's eyes.

I am convinced that, overall, the post-email messaging channels have made things worse, not better. I don't want to romanticize the past, but Email, SMS and phone calls worked just fine.

Email for asynchronous communication, SMS for an occasional live ping, and phone calls or face to face meetings for collaborative real-time problem solving. That was all it took to get things done.

Part of the reason that we have ended in this mess is that new channels have not replaced the old ones. Instead, they have multiplied the ways we communicate, requiring strategies to "unify" all those channels. But every channel is like a peacock, demanding its own attention.

So how do we get out of this mess?

We need to structure our communication around a clear visual set of goals (a Goalscape). We call this Goal Focussed Communication, and the following is a practical 1-Page guide on how to apply it:

Goal Focused Communication with Goalscape

1. **Reduce Context switching by focusing on very few (ideally one) goal at a time** ¹.

The context switching, caused by today's fast asynchronous communication, leads to a massive drop in productivity. Every time we switch context, we need to get 'into the groove'. These times are unproductive, and we can end up doing nothing but getting into the groove all day. So clearly label which goals are relevant NOW, and which are NEXT² and stick to those as much as possible.

2. **Use your goal structure as a communication structure. The Goal Name is the Subject Line.**

Developing a clear and motivating Goal structure is a very powerful tool; however most people and teams develop them half-heartedly. They underestimate the work and attention it takes; but they also under-appreciate its **value**, since this structure can serve as the perfect communication framework to get things done faster and evolve the goal structure further.

In Goalscape you can comment on a goal and decide which of your collaborators is to receive an email notification about it. The best part is that you do not have to come up with a subject line: the goal name IS the subject line! This reliably prepares the receiver for an impending context switch before having to open the message. And it creates the opportunity to defer or delete the message.

Email will not die in the next 10 years and it is a versatile means of communication that can be very powerful if used responsibly. So we might as well use it³, only with some simple rules to mind:

- Choose your recipients wisely.
- Avoid cc'ing too many recipients: cc messages are an awful gray-area; they are neither here nor there. Do they mean: "Just FYI" or "You should have known that...". Sometimes its use is intentionally ambiguous and that in itself is a red flag: it usually means that responsibilities are not clear and (worse) office politics may be involved⁴.

3. **Whenever possible, meet in person, one-on-one or with a carefully selected group (in real or virtual space) with a clear goal in mind.**

Do not carelessly invite people to big hangout sessions. Try to gain clarity about the following beforehand:

- What is the goal of the meeting?
- Who is responsible for the goal? Who is supporting? What are the subgoals, and who is responsible for those?
- What is the ideal amount of time for the meeting? Timebox wisely!

¹ Note [this exception](#).

² See [page 5 of this article](#) on how we manage goals with NOW and NEXT tags.

³ And even abandon any additional channel- or group-based communication.

⁴ That's why we have not included a cc option at all in Goalscape (for now ;-).

Summary and Outlook

Goal-focused communication may not be the solution to all our communication issues. I am convinced though that it helps to restore sanity. Goalscape helps anyone in the team to focus by clarifying the common and individual goals. Connecting this structure to the ongoing daily communication supercharges the whole process.

People will still post comments in the wrong goal. This can be very informative though, as it means one of these statements is true:

1. **The comment is useful, but related to a different goal.** Move the comment into the right goal.
2. **The comment is useful and there is no goal for it.** Create the goal: it must be something you had forgotten about so far! So this completes your goal structure. It may however also tell you that you are approaching 'goal overload'.
3. **The comment is not relevant:** Politely inform the sender that this comment does not help to change the world - so he or she should not keep those busy who aim to do just that.

One unsolved issue is inbox management. Goalscape does not include a message inbox, as we would hate to duplicate the email inbox. We may soon though include a filter to allow users to highlight goals with new comments.

We believe context switching is a modern disease and Goal Comments can cure it. We will continue to evolve Goalscape to support joyful and productive communication; and we welcome any feedback – email support@goalscape.com.