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Understanding the anatomy of goals



Preamble

As a scientist (amateur), I have often asked myself a number of questions, formed an hypothesis, developed a thesis and then undertaken an exercise to either prove or disprove both. Early on in my research and development of a data dictionary for Information Engineering, I came across the subject of objectives, goals and SWOT analysis and thought that I could somehow use these two components to augment my pursuit of data by finding another focal point other than uncovering documents containing data which would enable me to normalise and produce the data dictionary.

One of the first questions I had to ask myself was 'what is a goal' and what is an objective, this article is devoted to answering these questions.

So what is a goal? According to the Sage (a freely available dictionary and thesaurus I use in my research) a goal is "The state of affairs that a plan is intended to achieve and that (when achieved) terminates behavior intended to achieve it". Some synonyms are: aim, objective, object, grail, Holy Grail, end, target, design, desire, desired result, intention, intent, plan, purpose, idea, point, object of the exercise, ambition, aspiration, wish, dream, hope, resolve, raison d'être.

What is an anatomy? According to the Wikipedia (which I use a lot as it is fairly accurate and does not usually clutter the page with adverts) 'anatomy' is 'the branch of biology concerned with the study of the structure of organisms and their parts'.

Hence my definition of the 'anatomy of goals' is 'a structure of a plan revealing that (according to Aristotle) "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts"'.

To answer the 'what is an objective' will take a little longer as it depends on the encapsulation of goals and another part of the anatomy of information, namely the worth that is extrapolated by measuring one of the components of the goal anatomy.

Develop your own list

If you refuse to accept my anatomy of goals (and my 45+ years involvement with business and IT) then I challenge you to come up with one of your own. That is if you have the time and the patience. Here are the steps that you can follow to accomplish this, but I must warn you it will take a fair amount of time, so be prepared for a long exercise.

- Use a search engine to find occurrences of words using keywords such as 'aim', 'benefit', 'critical success factors', 'goal', 'mission', 'purpose', 'values', and 'vision' (or any of the above synonyms).
- Create a spreadsheet and populate a column with all the words.
- Sort the list alphabetically.
- For each row where there are multiple words insert a line for as many different words and replicate.
- Reduce multiple words to a single descriptive word.
- Reduce each line to a single word.
- Sort the list alphabetically.
- Remove obvious duplicates.

If you have the time: Use an on-line dictionary to define each word, copy and paste the definitions into a column labeled 'Definitions'. Now use a thesaurus to find synonyms and antonyms for each word and copy and paste these into columns labeled 'Synonyms' and 'Antonyms'. You may also want to look for 'Hyponyms' and 'Meronyms'.

Periodic table of chemical elements

Pause for a while and consider the following:- There are 118 elements in the periodic table of elements originally developed by Dmitri Mendeleev.

According to their shared physical and chemical properties, the elements can be classified into the major categories of metals, metalloids and non-metals.

Look through your list and see if you can find a few words that could be used to bind (group or encapsulate) others for example in my list I found words such as 'purpose', 'value', 'knowledge' 'benefit'. As knowledge appears to be the odd one out, I can ignore it for the time being which leaves me with 3 words. This looks remarkably like the 3 classifications of elements, so I think I have found a usable pattern, if not acceptable, come up with one of your own.

You may now need a leap of faith and go through each word in your list and decide whether the definition best fits the definition of one of these 3. If it does, then in a column labelled 'Goal' write the word 'Purpose', 'Benefit' or 'Value' in the row.

Sort the list alphabetically using the 'Goals' column. You have now at least got a head start along the road to understanding the 'anatomy of goals'.

I have already undertaken this exercise and have come up with a definitive list of 1 purpose, 4 benefits and encapsulated 11 values under the 4 benefits. This enabled me to develop the goals component of my AI engine which has encapsulated the conceptual and logical components or the anatomy of information.

If you can do better, then you are well on your way to achieving something I have not been able to.

Charles Meyer Richter
Principal information architect
Ripose Pty Limited
charles.richter@ripose.com