

NEURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING · A VISUAL SUMMARY

Well-Formed Outcomes

How to turn wishes into goals your mind can act on

Conditions · Questions · Process · Worked Examples · Checklist

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SECTION 01

What Is a Well-Formed Outcome?

A goal that has been shaped — through a set of specific questions — so that it is clear, motivating, achievable and fits the rest of your life.

In NLP, an **outcome** is a specific result you want. It becomes **well-formed** when it meets a set of conditions (usually five to eight, depending on the trainer) that make it easier for the mind to focus on, plan toward and recognise when achieved. The idea is simple: *a vague wish produces vague action*; a well-specified outcome directs attention, behaviour and resources.

Two ways to approach the same situation

PROBLEM FRAME

- What's wrong?
- Why do I have this problem?
- Whose fault is it?
- How long has it been bad?
- Why haven't I fixed it?

REFRAME →

looks back
→ looks forward

OUTCOME FRAME

- What do I want instead?
- How will I know I have it?
- What resources do I have?
- What's the first step?
- What else will improve?

Why it matters

Focus

Directs attention to what you want, not what you fear.

Motivation

A vivid, sensory goal is more compelling than an abstract one.

Measurability

Clear evidence tells you when you've arrived.

Congruence

The ecology check reduces self-sabotage and inner conflict.

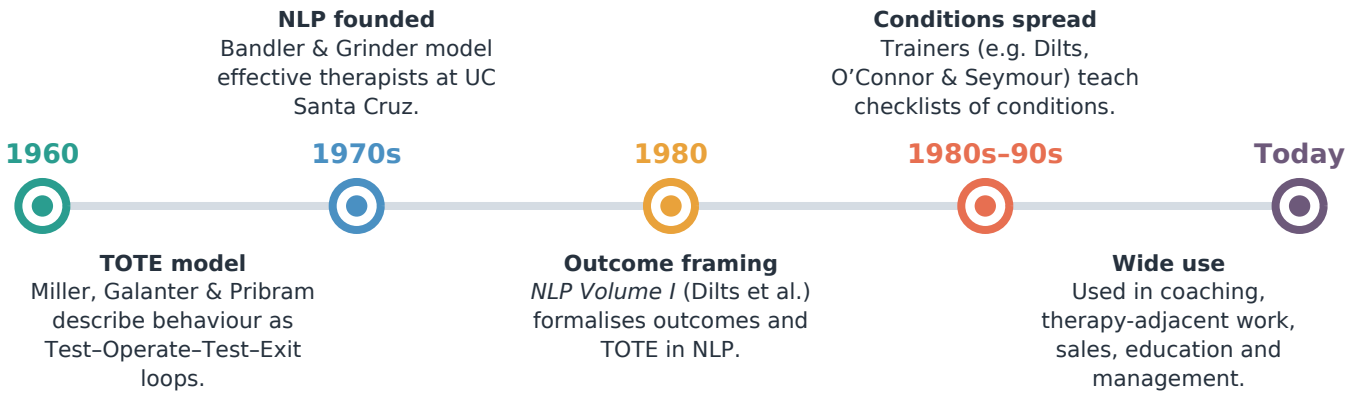
Core principle: the quality of your outcome shapes the quality of your results. The conditions are not bureaucracy — each one removes a common reason goals fail.

SECTION 02

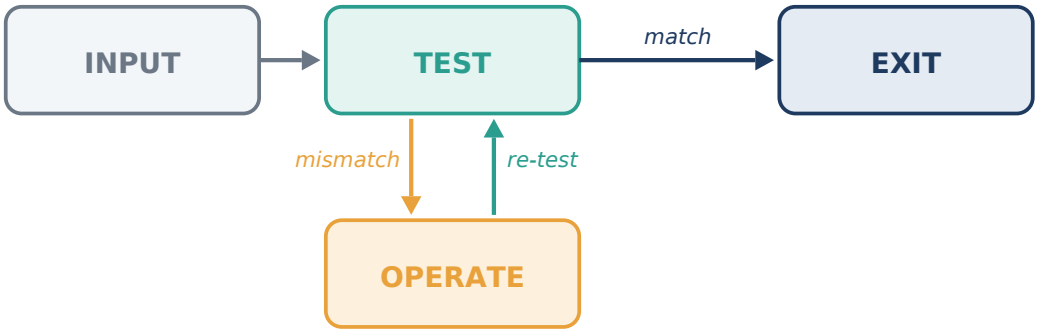
Origins and Background

Well-formed outcomes grew out of early NLP modelling work and borrow from cognitive psychology's feedback-loop models of behaviour.

A short timeline



The TOTE loop — the engine behind an outcome



Test: compare where you are with the outcome. **Operate:** act to reduce the gap. **Exit:** stop when the test shows a match.

A well-formed outcome supplies the **test criteria** — without clear evidence there is no way to know when to exit.

BALANCED VIEW

A note on evidence. NLP as a whole has limited support from controlled research, and several of its specific claims have not held up. Well-formed outcomes, however, overlap substantially with goal-setting principles that *are* well studied — specific goals, positive approach goals, implementation planning and anticipating obstacles. Treat the method as a practical structuring tool rather than a proven therapy.

SECTION 03

Present State → Desired State

Every change can be mapped as a journey from where you are to where you want to be. The outcome defines the destination.



Present State + Resources − Obstacles = Desired State

Element	Key questions	Why it matters
Present state	What is happening now? What do you see, hear, feel? What is the cost of staying here?	Establishes a baseline and creates honest leverage for change.
Desired state	What do you want? What will you see, hear and feel when you have it?	Gives the brain a clear target (the TOTE test).
Resources	What do you already have — skills, people, past successes — that will help?	Builds confidence and reveals the quickest routes.
Obstacles	What has stopped you before? What could get in the way?	Lets you plan around interference instead of being ambushed.

> The well-formed outcome conditions are essentially a quality check on the **desired state** and the **bridge** that leads to it.

SECTION 04

The Eight Conditions at a Glance

Different trainers list between five and eight conditions. This summary uses a widely taught set of eight.



#	Condition	Core question	Fixes the problem of…
1	Stated in the positive	What do you want (instead)?	Focusing on what to avoid
2	Self-initiated & maintained	Is this within your control?	Depending on others to change
3	Sensory-based evidence	How will you know you’ve got it?	Never knowing you’ve arrived
4	Context specified	When, where and with whom?	Goals that spill everywhere
5	Resources identified	What do you have / need?	Starting under-equipped
6	Ecologically sound	Is it worth it? What else changes?	Hidden costs and self-sabotage
7	Appropriately sized	Is it the right size to act on?	Overwhelm or triviality
8	Preserves by-products	What do you gain from now?	Losing hidden benefits

SECTION 05

Condition 1 · Stated in the positive

State what you want, not what you want to avoid. The mind needs a target to move toward.

Try *not* to think of a pink elephant — you just did. To process a negation, the brain first represents the very thing being negated. A goal like *"stop being anxious"* keeps anxiety at the centre of attention. A positively stated goal points attention at the desired experience.

AWAY-FROM



moves from pain — direction unclear

TOWARD



moves to a goal — direction clear

Reframing negatives into positives

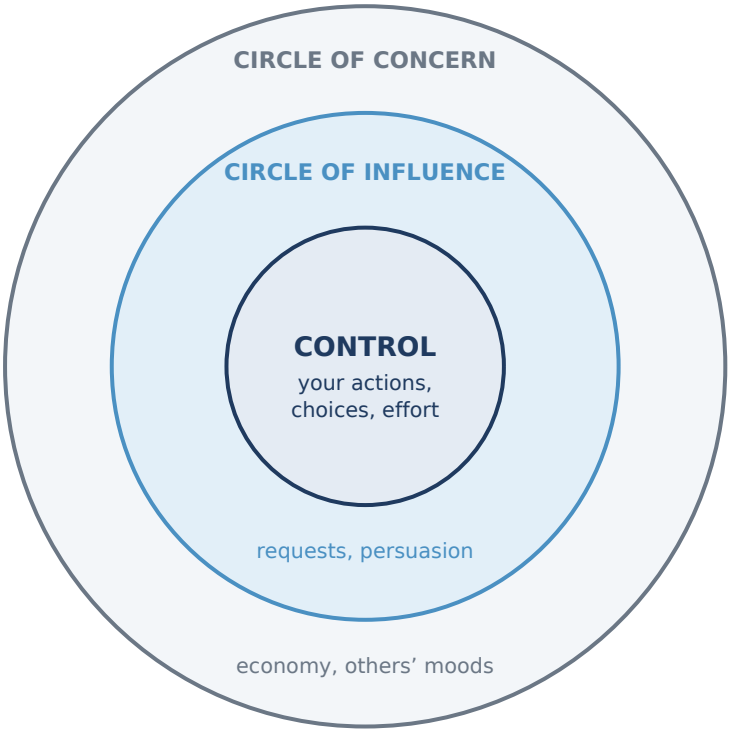
Negatively stated (avoidance)	Positively stated (approach)
I want to stop procrastinating.	I start my most important task by 9 a.m. each workday.
I don't want to feel nervous presenting.	I present calmly, with a steady voice and relaxed breathing.
I want to stop eating junk food.	I eat home-cooked meals with vegetables five days a week.
I don't want to argue with my partner.	We discuss disagreements calmly and each feel heard.
I want to get out of debt.	I have a zero credit-card balance and three months' savings.

Key question: "What do you want *instead*?" — ask it every time a goal contains *not, stop, less, avoid, quit* or *get rid of*.

SECTION 06

Condition 2 · Self-initiated & maintained

The outcome must be something you can start and sustain yourself — not something that depends on other people changing.



Place your outcome in the centre. If achieving it requires someone else to change, rewrite it around what *you* will do.

- **Initiated:** can you take the first step yourself, today?
- **Maintained:** once achieved, can you keep it going without outside rescue?
- **Influence, not control:** you can ask, model and invite — but not guarantee others' responses.

Depends on others	Within your control
My boss should recognise my work.	I share a monthly summary of my results with my boss.
I want my teenager to respect me.	I listen fully and set clear, consistent boundaries with my teenager.
I want the team to stop missing deadlines.	I agree clear deadlines and check progress weekly with each member.
I want to be picked for the promotion.	I build the three skills listed in the promotion criteria by June.

Key questions: "Can you start this yourself?" · "Is this within your control?" · "What will *you* do to achieve it?"

SECTION 07

Condition 3 · Sensory-based evidence

Describe the evidence that will tell you — through your senses — that you have achieved the outcome.

NLP emphasises the representational systems: what you will **see**, **hear** and **feel** (sometimes smell and taste). This "evidence procedure" turns an abstract wish into an observable test and makes the goal vivid enough to motivate.



SEE
Visual

What will you see around you?

What will others see you doing?
What will be on the page / screen?



HEAR
Auditory

What will people say to you?

What will you say to yourself?

How will your voice sound?



FEEL
Kinaesthetic

What emotions will you feel?

How will your body feel?

Where will you feel it?

From vague to verifiable

Vague goal	Sensory-based evidence
"Be more confident."	I **see** myself standing upright and making eye contact; I **hear** my voice clear and unhurried; I **feel** calm warmth in my chest.
"Have a better business."	I **see** 40 bookings a month in the calendar; I **hear** clients recommending us; I **feel** relaxed opening the accounts.
"Be healthier."	I **see** 10,000 steps on my tracker; I **hear** my doctor say my numbers are normal; I **feel** energetic at 4 p.m.

Key question: "How will you know when you've achieved it? What will you see, hear and feel?" Also ask: *how will someone else know?*

SECTION 08

Condition 4 · Context specified

Define where, when and with whom you want the outcome — and where you do not want it.

Behaviour that is useful in one setting can be unhelpful in another. Being highly assertive may be ideal in a negotiation but costly at the family dinner table. Specifying context keeps the change targeted and prevents unwanted side-effects.

WHEN?	WHERE?	WITH WHOM?
Times, days, deadlines, triggers	Places, settings, environments	People, groups, roles

HOW OFTEN?	UNTIL WHEN?	WHERE NOT?
Frequency and duration	Start date and end date	Contexts where you don't want it

Example: "I want to speak up more."

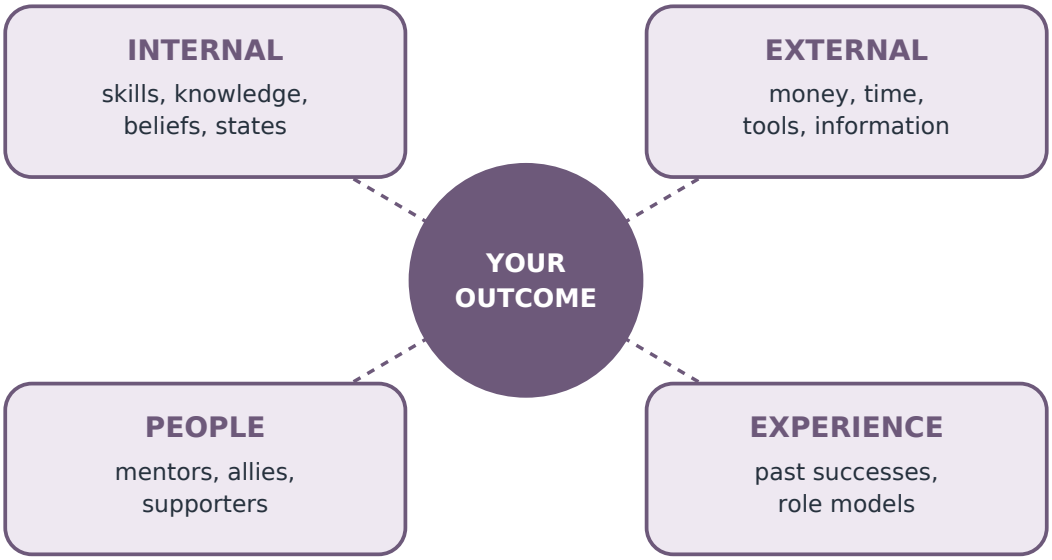
Context question	Answer
When?	In weekly team meetings, starting next Monday.
Where?	In the meeting room and on video calls.
With whom?	My team and my manager.
How often?	At least one idea or question per meeting.
Where NOT?	Not interrupting others; not in 1:1s where my role is to listen and coach.

Refined outcome: "From next Monday, I contribute at least one idea or question in every weekly team meeting, in person or on video, while letting others finish speaking."

SECTION 09

Condition 5 · Resources identified

Identify what you already have and what you still need to reach the outcome.



Resource audit — example: “Launch an online course by March”

Resource	Have it?	Gap / how to get it
Subject expertise	✓ Yes	Ten years of practice; existing workshop notes.
Video & editing skills	Partly	Take a short editing course; borrow a friend’s microphone.
Time	✗ No	Block 5 hours each Saturday; drop one weekly commitment.
Audience	Partly	Email 300 past workshop attendees; ask 5 for testimonials.
Belief / confidence	Partly	Recall the first workshop that went well; find a course-creator mentor.

Key questions: “What resources do you already have?” · “What else do you need?” · “Have you done something similar before?” · “Who do you know who has achieved this?”

SECTION 10

Condition 6 · Ecologically sound

Check that the outcome fits your values, relationships and wider life. Is it worth the cost?

In NLP, **ecology** means the whole system the change lives in. An outcome that conflicts with your values or harms relationships often triggers resistance or self-sabotage. Cartesian Questions examine the decision from four angles, deliberately confusing the logic to surface hidden objections.

Cartesian Questions

GET IT	**What WILL happen if you DO get it?** *benefits gained*	**What WON'T happen if you DO get it?** *hidden losses*
DON'T GET IT	**What WILL happen if you DON'T get it?** *cost of inaction*	**What WON'T happen if you DON'T get it?** *what staying preserves*

Also check:

- Health
- Family
- Work
- Money
- Values
- Friends
- Community

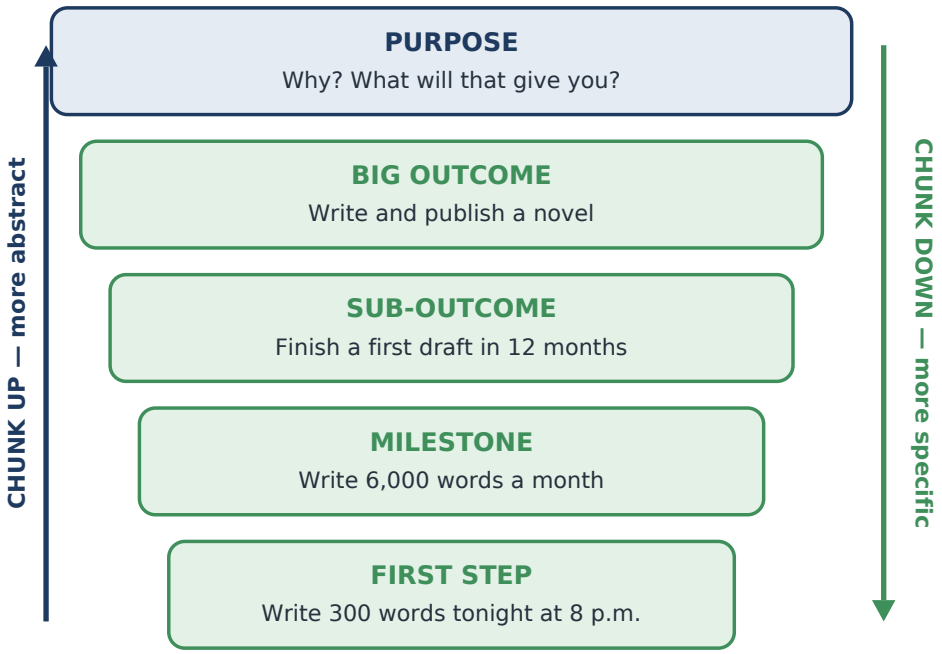
Ecology question	What it reveals
Is this outcome worth the time and effort it will take?	Commitment and priority
What will you have to give up or change?	Real costs and trade-offs
How will this affect the important people in your life?	Relational impact
Is there any part of you that objects?	Inner conflict ("parts") and incongruence
Does this fit who you are and want to be?	Alignment with identity and values

> Listen for **hesitation, a sigh or a "yes, but…"** — these incongruent signals usually point to an ecology issue worth resolving before you proceed.

SECTION 11

Condition 7 · Appropriately sized

Make the outcome big enough to be motivating and small enough to act on — by chunking up and down.



Chunk up when an outcome feels small or uninspiring:

- "What will this do for you?"
- "What is important about that?"

Chunk down when it feels overwhelming:

- "What specifically?"
- "What's the first step?"
- "What stops you starting now?"

Finding the right size

TOO SMALL	JUST RIGHT	TOO BIG
trivial, no energy	*stretching & doable*	*overwhelming, stalls*

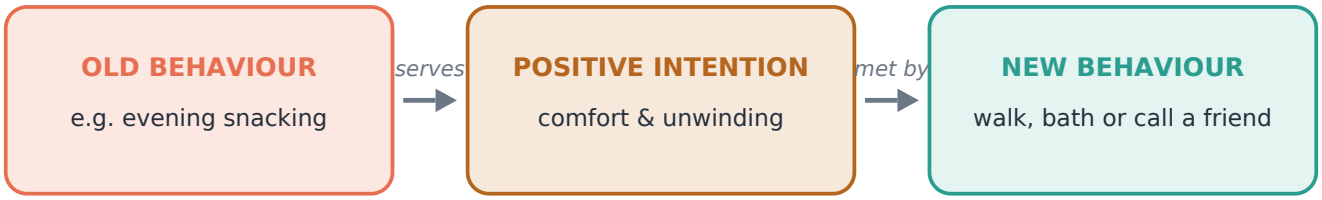
A practical test: **can you take an action toward it within the next 24 hours?** If not, chunk down. Does it make you feel energised? If not, chunk up to reconnect with its purpose.

SECTION 12

Condition 8 · Preserving Positive By-Products

Current behaviour, even unwanted behaviour, often delivers a hidden benefit. Keep that benefit in the new outcome.

NLP assumes that **every behaviour has a positive intention**. Smoking may provide breaks and calm; procrastination may protect against fear of failure; overworking may bring a sense of worth. These are *secondary gains*. If the new outcome removes them without replacement, the old pattern tends to return.



Current behaviour	Hidden benefit (secondary gain)	How the new outcome preserves it
Procrastinating on a big report	Avoids feeling judged	Share an early rough draft with one trusted colleague
Working until 10 p.m.	Feeling valued and needed	Track and share weekly wins; take on one high-visibility task
Smoking at work	Regular breaks and social chat	Take a 5-minute walk with colleagues every 90 minutes
Staying in a familiar job	Security and predictability	Build savings and a 6-month transition plan first
Avoiding the gym	Rest and time alone	Choose solo morning swims as both exercise and quiet time

Key questions: “What do you get from your current situation that you want to keep?” · “How can you keep that benefit while achieving your outcome?”

SECTION 13

The Master Question Set

Use these questions, in order, to coach yourself or someone else from a vague wish to a well-formed outcome.

#	Condition	Primary question	Follow-up prompts
1	**Stated in the positive**	What do you want?	*What do you want instead? What would you rather have?*
2	**Self-initiated & maintained**	Can you start and maintain it yourself?	*What will you do? What part is in your control?*
3	**Sensory-based evidence**	How will you know you have it?	*What will you see, hear, feel? How will others know?*
4	**Context specified**	Where, when and with whom do you want it?	*Where don't you want it? By when?*
5	**Resources identified**	What resources do you have and need?	*Have you done this before? Who can help?*
6	**Ecologically sound**	What will having it do for you, and is it worth it?	*Cartesian questions; any part that objects?*
7	**Appropriately sized**	Is it the right size?	*What's the first step? What will that give you?*
8	**Preserves positive by-products**	What do you get from the current situation?	*How will you keep that benefit?*

Bonus questions many practitioners add

? Motivation

On a scale of 1–10, how much do you want this?

? Commitment

What will you do in the next 24 hours?

? Future pace

Imagine you've achieved it — what's it like?

? Obstacles

What could stop you, and how will you respond?

> **Tip:** write the answers down. The act of writing tends to expose gaps — a missing deadline, an unclear first step or an unspoken objection — that are easy to miss when you only think it through.

SECTION 14

The Well-Formed Outcome Process

A step-by-step flow. At each checkpoint, if the answer is "no", loop back and refine before moving on.



The order is flexible — many practitioners check ecology early as well as late. What matters is that **every condition is satisfied** before you commit to action.

SECTION 15

Worked Example 1 · Career

Watch a typical complaint become a well-formed outcome, one condition at a time.

STARTING POINT

“I don’t want to be stuck in this boring job anymore.”

Condition	Coaching question	Client’s answer
1 Positive	What do you want instead?	A role where I design user experiences.
2 Self-initiated	What will you do?	Build a portfolio and apply for UX roles myself.
3 Evidence	How will you know?	I see a signed offer letter; I hear colleagues ask my design opinion; I feel excited on Monday mornings.
4 Context	When, where?	Within 12 months, at a mid-size tech company, hybrid working.
5 Resources	What do you have / need?	Have: research skills, empathy. Need: Figma skills, three case studies, a mentor.
6 Ecology	What will it cost? Who’s affected?	Evenings for 6 months; my partner supports it if weekends stay free.
7 Size	First step?	Enrol in a UX course this week; one case study per 8 weeks.
8 By-products	What do you value now?	Job security — so I keep my job and save 3 months’ expenses before switching.

WELL-FORMED OUTCOME

“Within 12 months I am working as a UX designer at a mid-size tech company with hybrid working. I'll know I've achieved it when I'm holding a signed offer and feel excited on Monday mornings. I'll get there by completing a UX course, building three case studies on weekday evenings, and working with a mentor — keeping weekends free and three months’ savings in place before I resign. I start by enrolling in a course this week.”

SECTION 16

Worked Example 2 · Health & Fitness

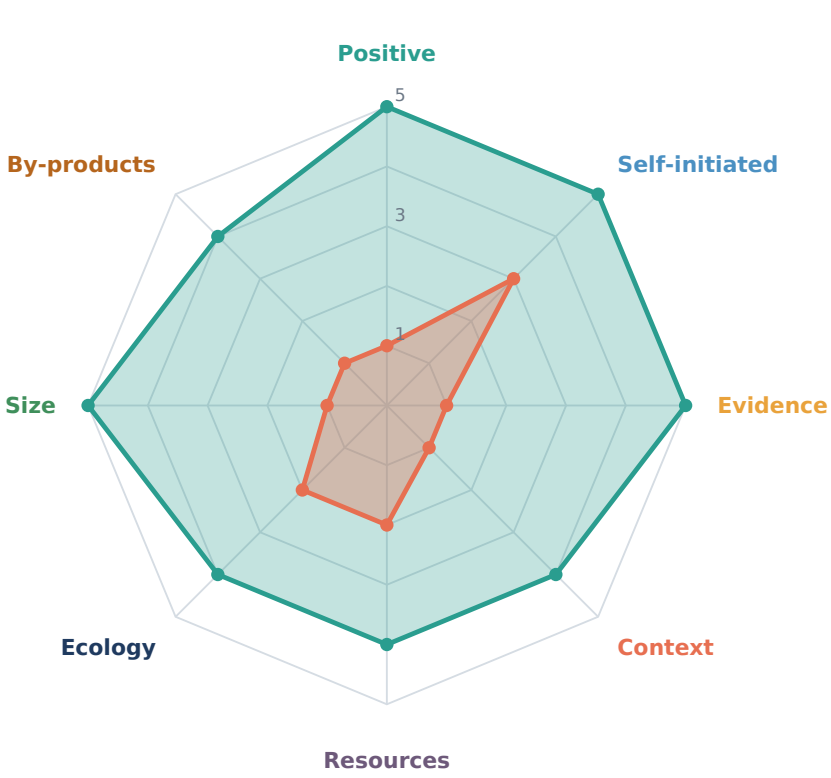
Scoring a goal against the eight conditions shows exactly where it is weak — and how refining it changes the profile.

BEFORE

“I need to stop being so unfit and lose weight.”

AFTER

“By 1 June I can run 5 km without stopping. Three mornings a week I run before work with my neighbour; I’ll see my time on the app and feel energised all day.”



Condition	Before	After
Positive	1	5
Self-initiated	3	5
Evidence	1	5
Context	1	4
Resources	2	4
Ecology	2	4
Size	1	5
By-products	1	4

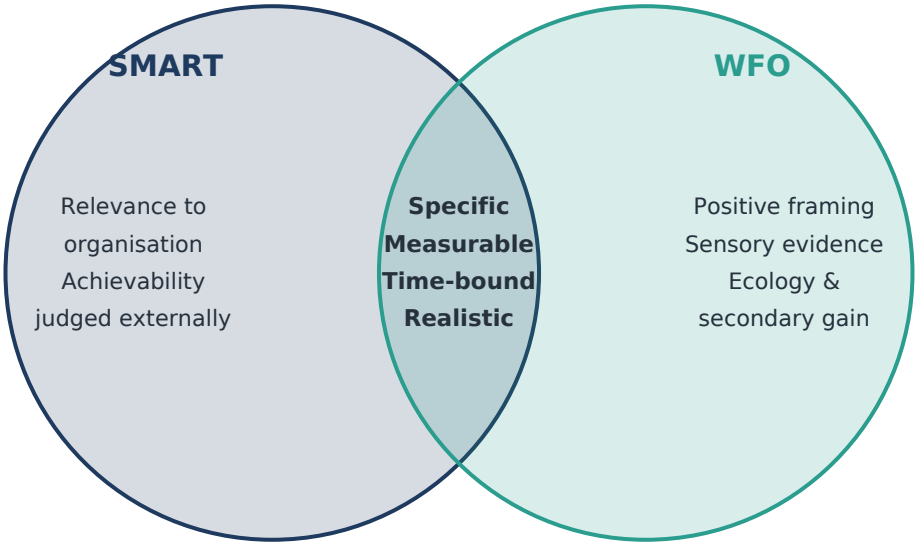
Illustrative self-assessment scores (1 = condition not met, 5 = fully met).

Try it yourself: score your own goal 1–5 on each condition. Any score of 3 or below shows where to ask more questions. Remaining gaps here (context, resources, ecology, by-products) could be closed by adding a back-up indoor plan, buying proper shoes, checking with family about mornings, and keeping a weekly treat.

SECTION 17

Well-Formed Outcomes vs SMART Goals

SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) are widely used in management. The two frameworks overlap — but emphasise different things.



Aspect	SMART goals	Well-formed outcomes
Origin	Management literature (Doran, 1981)	NLP (late 1970s–1980s)
Focus	Clarity and accountability of the target	Clarity plus the person’s inner experience
Measurement	Numeric or objective metrics	Sensory evidence (see / hear / feel) plus metrics
Framing	Not specified	Must be stated positively
Control	Implied via “achievable”	Explicit: self-initiated and maintained
Side-effects	Rarely considered	Ecology check and secondary gain
Best suited to	Teams, projects, performance reviews	Personal change, coaching, motivation

Use both. A SMART goal answers “is this target clear?”; the WFO conditions answer “will I actually pursue it wholeheartedly — and will getting it be good for me?”

SECTION 18

Common Pitfalls and Fixes

Most failed outcomes break one or two conditions. Recognising the pattern makes the fix obvious.

1 Hidden negative

× *“I want to be less stressed.”*

✓ **Fix:** Name the positive state: “calm and focused at work”.

2 Others must change

× *“I want my colleague to be nicer.”*

✓ **Fix:** Shift to your behaviour and influence.

3 No finish line

× *“I want to be successful.”*

✓ **Fix:** Define the see / hear / feel evidence.

4 Everywhere, always

× *“I want to say no more.”*

✓ **Fix:** Specify contexts — and where not.

5 Wishful thinking

× *No skills, time or support planned.*

✓ **Fix:** Run a resource audit; find role models.

6 Ignored costs

× *Goal quietly harms health or family.*

✓ **Fix:** Cartesian questions; adjust or re-scope.

7 Overwhelm

× *“Become fluent in Japanese.”*

✓ **Fix:** Chunk down to a 24-hour first step.

8 Relapse

× *Old habit returns after early success.*

✓ **Fix:** Find and replace the secondary gain.

Diagnostic shortcut: when a goal has stalled, don’t ask “why am I failing?” (problem frame). Ask “*which condition is this outcome missing?*” (outcome frame).

SECTION 19

Quick-Reference Checklist & Key Takeaways

Print this page and run every important goal through it.

☐	**1. Stated in the positive**	*What do you want?*
☐	**2. Self-initiated & maintained**	*Can you start and maintain it yourself?*
☐	**3. Sensory-based evidence**	*How will you know you have it?*
☐	**4. Context specified**	*Where, when and with whom do you want it?*
☐	**5. Resources identified**	*What resources do you have and need?*
☐	**6. Ecologically sound**	*What will having it do for you, and is it worth it?*
☐	**7. Appropriately sized**	*Is it the right size?*
☐	**8. Preserves positive by-products**	*What do you get from the current situation?*

My outcome:

Key takeaways

FRAME
Shift from the problem frame to the outcome frame.

SPECIFY
Make the goal positive, sensory-based and in context.

OWN IT
Keep it in your control and resourced.

PROTECT
Check ecology and preserve hidden benefits.

ACT
Size it right — take the first step within 24 hours.