



■ Partha Sarathi Basu,
Director Finance, AkzoNobel,
India & South Asia

When Life Goals Turn Opaque

“Success is not final, failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue that counts” – Winston Churchill.

W

ith these words I begin my story of two friends, one whose life goal is to stay happy and he draws lessons from his own life incidents, in work and in play. He quickly learns to step back and start all over again when life demands it. The other, had a career goal which he achieved very quickly, and then has nothing left to achieve. He begins to despair until his friend tells him that they will once again write down their ambition on paper like they had when they were young and starting out in life. He excitedly agrees, and the two write down their ambitions on paper and resolve to meet five years' later on the same date, to review what they had each achieved.

Avik was always my best friend. We grew up together, lived in the same locality in Kolkata, and went to the same school. I remember our early days together, I would spend more time in his house than in mine. I was practically living there, especially during school holidays when I would arrive at his home early morning. We would study together often I would stay over for lunch and return home late in the evening. It helped me as Avik was a year senior to me in school, and he would guide me. I knew I was not of much help to him, but we were so close that I guessed my sheer presence motivated him to study. And this was probably my only contribution in his life.

Avik was always my best friend. We grew up together, lived in the same locality in Kolkata, and went to the same school. I remember spending my early years almost living in his house



‘become like him’. I would not have it any other way and hence, I did not mind this advice from my parents. I worshipped my friend as my ‘guru’.

After school, he decided to pursue commerce as he had set his heart on becoming a chartered accountant. My parents wished that I become an engineer, but I ignored their wish, and following Avik. I too enrolled in a finance course.

A life pact

One day during this period, Avik and I were discussing our future plans when we decided that we would each ‘privately’ write down our ambition on a piece of paper. Then putting the paper in an envelope, we exchanged them, and pledged to meet on the very same date, 15 years later, when we would open each other’s envelopes to see whether we had fulfilled our dream. With this promise we preserved the envelope in our possession carefully.

After completing our studies, we left Kolkata. Avik settled down in Mumbai and I in Delhi. But we remained in touch, speaking with each other almost every day. We often spoke about our pledge and laughed at the time when we had childishly made it.

Sharing a great bond

Our families too, shared a great bond. My father called him ‘Jack of all trades and master of all’. Truly, Avik had excelled in almost every field: Right from studies and activities related to it, to sports. My parents loved him, and they often told me to

Time to review

Fifteen years flew by and soon the date was upon us. With great anticipation we met as scheduled and opened the envelopes. As I read what Avik had envisioned for himself 15 years' ago I acknowledged his far sight. His piece of paper said, "I want to be a CFO by the time I turn 35 years' old." I jumped with joy, because he had fulfilled his ambition. He was a CFO. When I looked at him and smiled, he shrugged almost as if to say that he had known what he wanted. Then, it was my turn. Avik read my paper out loud. "I want to be happy in life," it said. Avik burst into laughter, and asked me, "What does this mean dude?"

I felt embarrassed, and did not know what to answer. I just said, "It means what it says. To be honest." Rushing ahead in my explanation, I said, "That day when we were writing down our ambitions on paper, I could not define a goal for myself. And hence I wrote what I believed in, which is to be happy in life."

Avik replied, "I must say, we have both achieved what we wanted to," and then we raised our glasses to a toast.

A mid-life crisis

Five years have passed since then. I met Avik a few months ago, and noticed a change in him. He looked different and the spark seemed to be missing in him. He was quiet, lost in thought.

When I inquired about the reason for his silence, he said, "You know, I was waiting to talk to you. I have no one else to share my thoughts with."

I nodded, as he continued. "I have progressed well in my career, and become a CFO quite early. I thought my life is set and I can only zoom ahead from there on, to attain newer heights. But to my surprise, I was wrong. Look at me. I have stalled at the same place where I was five years ago. I have changed companies, but not my job. I am still a CFO, of a mid-size company.

In reality, I have not progressed even an inch forward in the last few years, and I will probably remain here till I die," he mourned.

I felt disheartened and wondered how even a successful career like his, which looks so coveted from the outside, can be so dissatisfying. I decided that since Avik needed to share with me his thoughts, I would gently prod him on by asking him questions and hear him carefully.

So I asked him, "What have you defined for yourself, for the next few years?" His reply told me why he was so troubled.

"You have hit the nail on the head my friend," Avik said. "My problem is I really do not know where I should head to next. When we wrote down our ambitions I was clear in my mind what I wanted to be 15 years on. I worked towards it, and chose every

step to achieve my goal. But today, I am lost in my own maze. I am unable to decide what I need to achieve over the next few years."

He then paused and asked me, "Where can I head to my friend, if I do not know my destination? Is it not disturbing?"

I thought to myself Avik was right. It was indeed very worrying. But I smiled at him reassuringly, and said, "Do not worry. Everything will be fine. Let us each write down our ambitions again, and we can meet at this same place five years from now, to review whether we have achieved what we set out to." Avik looked excited, and like a child exclaimed, "Let's do it." And so we did.

Over time I began to understand Avik's dilemma better. I realised that he had been facing a mid-life crisis, and his life goals had become opaque. Having fulfilled what he had defined for himself at the start of his career, he felt he had nothing left to achieve. He did not realise that he needed to take a fresh look at the game, and start all over again. This way he could overcome his mid-life crisis.

Over time I began to understand Avik's dilemma better. I realised that he was facing a mid-life crisis, and his life goals had become opaque





Lessons in cricket

In my early years I have played a lot of cricket. I even played competitive cricket for some years, hoping to represent India one day. Over time, balancing studies and sports became extremely difficult, and with studies gaining priority I had to abandon my desire to take up sports as a career.

Today, as I think back on my past, I wonder whether spending days on the cricket field had been a waste of time, and would I have done better to spend this time in my studies. The answer is a simple, NO! Sports has taught me many things such as, how to overcome challenges. It has developed a killer instinct

in me to win against competition; work in a team; deal with adversity; and learn from failure, among others. These lessons have been invaluable in my journey through the corporate world.

I remember one season when I was in my best form, but was not being able to score big runs. Match after match I could not stay beyond 50 runs, getting out with the very next ball - dashing all my hopes of reaching a century. My frustration only grew as I realised that I was busting my chances of playing in a big team, as the cricket clubs watching us play would not select me. I tried my best, but failed to go beyond a half century!

One day I met a senior cricketer from yester years, and shared my problem with him. He smiled at me and said, "This happens and I have the solution for you. Every time you score a half-century, relax a while, take off your helmet, remove your gloves, keep the bat on the ground, and then once again adopt a fresh stance to begin a new innings. As you start, in your mind you should agree to play again from the beginning. This will break the monotony and help you set a new goal to achieve." I followed his instructions blindly and things did change for me. I scored many centuries in the

remaining part of the season.

On reaching our goal, we seldom take the crucial step back to define our next objective. And this is when we start slowing down



Starting all over again

If I now relate back to my learning that season, I find that during the first part of the season I had promised myself a decent score, and I achieved it which is 50 runs. Thereafter, since I was not clear what my next goal would be, I did not have a second strategy, and was stuck with achieving 50 runs. Similar things happen in a career. When we begin in the corporate world, we aim for what we want to achieve in the next 15–18 years. Often, many of us reach our targets as we also chalk out a clear strategy to achieve it. However, once we reach there, we seldom take the crucial step back to define our next objective. This is when we start slowing down our progress, which has so far been fast-paced.

Midlife is the time when we need to re-define your goal; it is the time to take out your note book and once again chalk out a new plan for the next few years. If our goals are not clear, how can we expect to reach there? ■

This is a work of fiction, any names of people or places are not based on any real-life incident, and are fictitious.