



FREE THE FUTURE FROM THE PAST

For most people, the word *planning* means prediction. There's another option called *planning by creation*, and using it can change your whole experience of determining what you want.

Much of the goal setting that's done in business, government, and education is planning by prediction. In this type of planning, people carefully study what's happened in the past and use that data to predict what will happen in the future.

Planning by prediction is based on a few assumptions. One is that past events are the best predictors of what's yet to come. Another is that the forces now shaping our lives will continue to be at work in the future. In a sense, prediction is the past masquerading as the future.

Planning by creation means freeing the future from the past, and it involves a different set of working assumptions. For this second type of planning, you start from a blank slate—from nothing. Without considering the past, you state what you want to happen in the future. Then you ask how to achieve those goals. The underlying idea is that the past does not have to determine or limit what you can experience in the future.

I'm not saying that planning by creation is "better" than planning by prediction. Both types of planning have their uses. My suggestion is to know at any given moment what kind of planning you're doing—and to choose the type that suits your purpose.

To understand the differences between planning by prediction and planning by creation, look at two ways to create a budget.

For many companies, budgeting is an exercise in planning by prediction. The corporate planners predict next year's income and expenses based on this year's income and expenses. This amounts to taking the previous year's budget and "fixing" it.

An alternative is creating a budget from scratch. This means taking last year's budget, crumpling it up, and throwing it away. Instead of fixing last year's figures, the planners ask a lot of questions: What do we value? What do we want to be doing one year from now? How much money do we want to be making? How much do we want to be spending? What steps can we take to meet these goals?

Sometimes this approach is called *zero-based budgeting*. The same strategy could be applied to many areas of life and be called *zero-based planning*—or planning by creation. You can experiment with this strategy by doing the next exercise.



Create the future from nothing

This exercise is an open inquiry into what's possible for the rest of your life—and beyond. During the exercise, you will experiment with totally erasing your personal history and current identity. You will start your life over again and then set goals.

Please be willing to stick with this process even if it sounds crazy. There is a logic hidden in this request to begin your life from nothing.

The point is that most of us live full lives, filled with a lot of “something.” We carry around a detailed personal history: successes, failures, attachments, obligations, requirements, relationships, careers, thoughts, feelings, habits, and much more.

We can become so committed to preserving our personal history that we squash any possibility of change. Often history has such unrelenting momentum that we forget about alternatives. Our lives can get so “full” that we leave no room for something fresh—like a room that is so full that it has no place for a beautiful new painting.

So consider what it would be like to re-create your life from a clean slate. Imagine that you could wipe out the past and start over, fresh. What would you have? What would you do? Who would you choose to be?

To create a blank slate, start by relaxing. Take three deep slow breaths, release tension, and feel all parts of your body relax. Then continue reading and imagine doing the following:

- **Erase your current job.** Imagine that you have no job. Whether you love it, hate it, or feel neutral about it, the job's gone. Vanished. (Relax. You can have your job back at the end of this exercise.)
- **Erase your financial concerns.** Money problems are permanently behind you. Imagine that money is no longer used as a medium of exchange. Banks and credit cards no longer exist. There's no point in having money, and no one has any. You can get whatever you want without needing to have any money.
- **Erase your health problems.** Disease, chronic illness, and disability—whether real or imagined—are no longer issues for you.
- **Erase your friends.** Peers, colleagues, neighbors, acquaintances—all of them are gone. (Don't worry about being lonely. Your friends will still be there after this exercise.)
- **Erase your enemies.** Imagine that any people you resented or fought with are no longer part of your life.
- **Erase your family.** (Again, don't worry. These people are safe, and you can bring them back later.) For now, pretend that they are no longer around.
- **Erase your spouse or romantic partner.** Do this now, even if you have a wonderful relationship. Let this person go to the same place that your friends and family have gone.
- **Erase your house or apartment.** As of now, imagine that you have no place to live. No longer do you define yourself by the size, price, or location of your living space.

- **Erase your other possessions**, especially the big-ticket items such as cars or boats. And erase your precious possessions as well—the pictures, jewelry, old letters, and keepsakes.
- **Erase your community.** The town, city, or rural area where you grew up is gone. So is the town where you currently live.
- **Erase your memories.** All those accomplishments, those hurts, those mistakes, those successes—release them all.
- **Release your expectations.** Erase any thoughts about how future events should unfold.
- **Erase time.** Mentally toss your watch and clocks out the window. Then erase the window.
- **Erase your values.** Release any goal to be wise, healthy, creative, wealthy, passionate, punctual, or polite. Also let go of any goals about what you'd like to do or have in your lifetime.
- **Erase your religion.** For the moment, pretend there's no need for any special set of beliefs or practices.
- **Now notice anything about yourself that remains.** Is your body still there? Erase it. Are your clothes or glasses still there? Erase them, too. (Notice that you erased your body before you erased your clothes, so there's no need to feel embarrassed.) Also erase your emotions, opinions, and thoughts. If you have any worry about all that you've erased so far, just notice that worry and erase it also. Then erase anything else that's left.

- **Finally, notice any remaining thoughts about this exercise**—that it's silly, profound, boring, frightening, or anything else. Let those thoughts billow up and vanish like a bubble.

If these suggestions worked for you, you're at a blank slate.

Congratulations. You've arrived at a peak state of creativity. In fact, now that you're nobody, you may even be better company than when you were merely somebody. At this moment, you're free to make any choice whatsoever about what to have, do, and be. From the state of nothingness, you can call forth all possibilities.

Dwell in this state for at least five minutes. You could even extend this time to several hours. While in this state, ask yourself *What do I want? What's next for me?* Write your answers as goals on 3x5 cards or a separate sheet of paper.

After you've recorded these goals, slowly let yourself start to fill up again. Allow all your old roles, relationships, and possessions to *gradually* rejoin you. Return yourself to the present.

When you've fully come back to the present, review the goals you wrote back when you were nothing. Save those goals to review and refine as you read the rest of this book.



Create the distant future

Extending your goals outward in time—as far as you can possibly imagine—is one way to create a comprehensive global vision. There's no need to stop at setting goals for 10, 20, 50, or 100 years. Your goals can extend 500, 1,000, or even 10,000 years into the future.

If thinking so far ahead seems like an impossible or useless mental stretch, then keep a few things in mind:

- In the entire span of human history, a century is a very short period of time. Recall the history courses you took in school. There you probably reviewed entire decades in a matter of minutes. You can now preview the distant future in the same way that you reviewed the distant past.
- Many leaders have adopted the habit of looking decades or even centuries into the future. The people of ancient Egypt who designed the pyramids envisioned building projects that took several generations to complete. The people who drafted the Constitution of the United States created a document to guide the government for hundreds of years. When President Dwight D. Eisenhower announced his vision of an interstate highway system to blanket the country, he knew that this goal would take decades to complete. The fruit of this vision was perhaps the most successful public works project in human history.
- Goals for the distant future can represent highlights, not detailed agendas. When you set goals for the next decade or next century, you will mostly create the major events—the turning points in human affairs. These transformational events might take place over a period of many years.
- When you think 500 years or more into the future, it's easier to go beyond your short-term self-interests. In 500 years you will be gone from the earth. So will your children, your grandchildren, and their grandchildren. With a long-range perspective, you can be more objective and consider the fate of humanity as a whole.
- After thinking about long stretches of time, you might find it easier to think about shorter stretches. Once you've practiced thinking 100, 500, and even 10,000 years into the future, the notion of planning five years, 10 years, and even 20 years into the future can seem like child's play.

With the above points in mind, do the following:

1. Writing on a separate sheet of paper, describe the world you want to see in the year 2500. Remember that this is not an exercise in predicting the world of 2500. Rather, it's a statement about what you want humanity to have achieved by that time.
2. After you've played with creating the world of 2500, go even farther out in the future. Conceive the world you'd like to see in the year 3000 or 5000.
3. Now stretch your planning muscles even more and write goals for the year 10,000. Remember that 10,000 years ago, people were not yet farming, let alone writing. And in 8,000 years from now, people will likely be doing things that we can hardly imagine.

This concept of long-range goal setting might seem strange to you right now. If so, that's fine. Just experiment with the idea and see if it has any potential usefulness for you.

To spur your creativity, consider the following list of goals from one group of people who mentally stood in the year 10,000 and described what they saw.

We can decode natural communication systems. Now humans can communicate with rocks, plants, and all species of animals.

Eating is optional; we eat only for pleasure. It's a world of virtual cuisine.

Physical pain is erased with thought.

Bodies are optional, and we can live in the spiritual dimension at any time. There are "bodies-optional" beaches.

War has been absent from Earth for centuries. Now conflict is resolved by teams of skilled negotiators who can be dispatched to any place on the planet in a matter of seconds—before any dispute can involve weapons.

Cities are limited in size to 100,000 people at most. This, combined with nonpolluting, clean, and safe mass transit, makes traffic congestion and vehicle accidents a thing of the distant past.

Natural disasters are predicted with absolute accuracy, far enough in advance to make mass evacuations possible. No longer is anyone killed because of tornadoes, floods, or earthquakes.



Prioritize and categorize

Doing the exercises so far in this book probably left you with a large collection of goals, perhaps hundreds of them. Now you have an opportunity to gather all those ideas, organize them, and refine them.

Consider adding the following four items to each goal when appropriate:

- Priority
- Partners
- Timeline
- Categories

If you're writing goals in the center of 3x5 cards, as I suggested earlier, then you can note these items in a corner of each card. If you're writing goals on regular-sized paper or a computer, then find an appropriate place to add these items.

Add priorities

Rate each goal according to how important it is to you. I suggest writing a letter in the upper right-hand corner of your cards—A, B, C, D, or O. Each letter symbolizes a different level of priority.

I'll explain these by starting at the bottom of the scale with O. O's are obligations—things that you think you ought to do. It's okay to have some of those. And if you truly want to maximize your enjoyment and freedom, I recommend that you minimize the O's. See if you can eliminate these or raise them to one of the following priority levels.

D represents a below-average goal or a low-priority desire. You might not be sure you truly want it. Yet the goal aligns with your purpose, and you still want to keep it on file as a possibility.

If the goal is something you know you want, it's a C-priority. This is an average desire—one that you plan to satisfy. It's important to you but not critical to achieve.

B-priority goals are things that tap into your passion. You're willing to create a written, detailed action plan to meet these goals. You're going to put time and money into satisfying these desires.

A-priority goals represent things that you absolutely intend to achieve. You're willing to promise that you'll get these things done, and you're willing to do whatever it takes.

One caution: Don't make too many of your cards A's. If you have an abundance of A priorities, your vision could get top-heavy, fall over, and collapse. Your promises might feel like obligations since you have too many goals to achieve.

Add partners

In the lower right-hand corner of your cards, write the names of your partners—the people who can assist you in meeting each goal. There are plenty of people who will help you get what you want. In many cases, they'll be glad to lend a hand if you simply ask them.

Add timelines

In the upper left-hand corner of each card, give yourself a timeline for achieving each goal. You can note timelines in several different forms. For example, note a specific date, month, or year that you'd like to get what you want ("finish my novel by June 2003"). Or write a span of time that represents how long you'd like to do something ("spend two months in the Caribbean during the year 2005").

Perhaps you have no idea what the timeline is for a goal. That's fine. Just make something up for now and write it down. Remember that determining what you want is not about *knowing* your future—it's about *inventing* your future.

Also remember that some goals are probably better off without time limits. You probably wouldn't write "I want to be compassionate from 2001 to 2007." Some goals represent things you'd like to have, do, or be for your entire life.

Add categories

Your goals will naturally fall into certain categories such as *health, wealth, education, relationships, fun, or spirituality*. In the lower left-hand corner of your cards, note this category.

For even more precision, you can add subcategories. For example, the large category relationships can include the subcategories *family, friends, and colleagues*. If a goal pertains to your family, you could write *RELATIONSHIPS: Family* in the lower left corner.

Sort cards and add details

An advantage of adding these four items to your goals is that you can sort and re-sort your goals according to each item. If you first sort goals by timelines, for instance, you can later experiment with organizing them by priorities, partners, or categories. This can reveal gaps in your vision, such as an abundance of goals in the category of *work* and a lack of goals under *recreation*. Also, re-sorting your goals from time to time can give you fresh perspective on your vision and prompt you to discover or invent even more goals.

The process of adding priorities, partners, timelines, and categories will help you add specifics to your vision of paradise. Now that you've determined what you want at this level of detail, you can begin taking focused and powerful action to get it.

