

Four Categories of Goals, Problems & Solutions

The Flip Side of The Goals Grid

The Goals Grid: Four Categories of Goals

Perhaps the most popular tool I've developed – and certainly one of my favorites – is The Goals Grid. As shown in the diagram below, it reflects the interplay of two questions that are answerable Yes or No.

1. Do you have it?
2. Do you want it?

"It" is some circumstance, condition or state of affairs you deem desirable. A raise or a promotion might be one. So might a particular position or assignment. Or perhaps it is something like the reject rate or waste rates or unit costs in a production process. "It" might even be something like increased profits or a triple AAA bond rating for your corporation. In any event, "it" is something of interest and value to you.

The resulting 2x2 matrix shows four categories of goals:

1. Achieve
2. Preserve
3. Avoid
4. Eliminate

All goals fall into one of these four categories.

Four Categories of Problems

To realize a goal, you must take action. Said another way, action is required. A problem exists when action is required but the action to take is not known. You must figure out what action to take. It is not knowing what to do that makes a problem a problem.

There are, then, also four basic categories of problems and all problems fit into one of the four categories.

1. *Achievement.* You want something you don't have but you don't know what to do to get it. In this case, you are looking for a course of action that will get you what you want.
2. *Preservation.* You have something you want, and you want to keep it, but you're not sure what to do to make that happen. Here, you are looking for a course of action that will maintain the status quo, that will let you keep what you have.
3. *Avoidance.* Something you don't want is about to or is likely to happen and you're not clear about how to prevent that. This is a search for ways and means of heading off unwanted circumstances, events, or developments.

The Goals Grid

**Do You
Want It?**

Yes

No

I Achieve	III Avoid
II Preserve	IV Eliminate

No

**Do You
Have It?**

Yes

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4. *Elimination*. A condition or circumstance you don't want already exists and how to get rid of it is not clear. This is a case of finding or configuring a course of action that will get rid of some unwanted condition.

Obviously, the four categories of problems are the flip side of the Goals Grid and rightly so. In all four cases we are talking about the relationship between actions and outcomes. Couple that with the fact that a problem exists when the action that will lead to a desired outcome is not known, and it becomes clear that a problem can exist in relation to any of the four categories of goals. Thus, just as all goals fit into one of four basic categories, so, too, do all problems.

Four Categories of Solutions

It doesn't require a great deal of thought to further realize that four different kinds of action are involved. Achieving conditions that don't currently exist is different from eliminating conditions that already exist. Avoiding unwanted conditions requires actions different from those needed to preserve existing conditions. There are, then, also four basic categories of solutions.

1. *Achievement* Solutions. In this case, the search is for a course of action that will create and put into place something new, something that is wanted but does not currently exist.
2. *Preservation* Solutions. In this case, the search is for a course of action that will shore up and maintain existing conditions that are deemed desirable.
3. *Avoidance* Solutions. In this case, the search is for a course of action that will head off and prevent looming or emerging unwanted conditions.
4. *Elimination* Solutions. In this case, the search is for a course of action that will remove or get rid of existing, unwanted conditions.

In all four categories, the focus is different as is the aim and the kinds of actions required. In the case of Achievement Solutions, the focus is on some future state and the aim is to design and put into place new arrangements. For Preservation Solutions, the focus is on existing arrangements and the aim is to reinforce them. For Avoidance Solutions, the focus is on the future and the aim is to head off or offset emerging or potential unwanted developments. And, in the case of Elimination Solutions, the focus is once again on current arrangements but with the aim of dismantling or removing unwanted ones. The requirements and challenges of each category of solution are quite different (see the table below).

Four Categories of Goals, Problems and Solutions

Goals	Achieve	Preserve	Avoid	Eliminate
Problems	Achievement	Preservation	Avoidance	Elimination
Solutions	Actions that will get you what you want but don't have	Actions that will let you keep what you have that you want	Actions that will head off what you don't have and don't want	Actions that will get rid of what you have but don't want

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Fortunately, it is very easy to keep all this mind. You know what a GPS is, right? Well, in this case, GPS stands for Goals, Problems, Solutions. All you have to do is remember the four basic cells in The Goals Grid: Achieve, Preserve, Avoid and Eliminate. Then think about them in relation to Goals, Problems, and Solutions. Or, if you're a fan of keeping reminder diagrams where you can see them, you are welcome to use the table above.

There you have it: The flip side of The Goals Grid. It seems The Goals Grid is a GPS system all its own.

About the Author

Fred Nickols is a writer, consultant, former executive and the Managing Partner of Distance Consulting, LLC. He retired from the Navy as a decorated Chief Petty Officer and took up a consulting career in the private sector. He maintains a web site at www.nickols.us and can be reached via email by clicking [here](#).