

Intrinsic Goal Setting in the Classroom and for the Bar Exam

Recently, I learned about the strengths-based approach to setting and achieving goals in a Positive Psychology course. As my professor explained, in those moments we activate our strengths, we may perform extraordinarily well on tasks. In fact, our performance will take much less effort by activating our strengths rather than focusing on “overcoming” our weaknesses.

Unfortunately, many of us do not know our own strengths. Instead, we identify with the character strengths others have told us we have or those strengths for which we have received compliments. Likewise, we often are told that we need to work on our weaknesses (real or perceived) instead of placing more effort on our strengths. This combination can lead to frustration, a sense of failure, and a lack of motivation to set or achieve goals.

Recognizing its application to bar preparation, I modified an exercise for third-year law students that guides them to identify their strengths and to realize the power of using those strengths in their bar study plans. Although the following activity was created to guide students through creating a bar study plan based on their strengths, it is easily adaptable for any goal, such as a final exam or research paper, writing for law review, conducting a career job search, preparing for an interview, etc.

The activity begins with a deep-dive into what motivated students to attend law school and then moves on to helping students recognize which of their goals are extrinsically motivated and at risk for failure. Since many students are unsure how to write intrinsically-motivated goals, be prepared to discuss motivation and goal-setting with students and to provide examples of intrinsically-motivated goals prior to asking students to complete this activity.

PROCESS

1. Complete the Values in Action (VIA) Survey of Character Strengths at viacharacter.org. The survey is free, but students are required to register to take the survey. Students receive personalized results explaining their strengths and how to apply them for greater well-being.
2. Students then write a reflection journal identifying their top five strengths, summarizing how each strength has helped them in life, and describing how each strength can be used as they prepare to take and successfully pass the bar exam.
3. Student results are collected and shared anonymously in charts/graphs. As a class, students discuss whether focusing on their strengths improves their mindset for setting and achieving their goals.
4. Students then complete the activity, “My Strengths-Based Bar Study Plan” and submit it to me prior to our individual appointment to discuss their plans for preparing for the upcoming bar exam. (A copy of the activity is shared below.)

RESULTS

After completing this exercise, students reported

- A. realizing that their motivations for success were often rooted in fears of failure or “letting down” family members. Shifting from fear-based motivation to intrinsically-motivated goals “felt better.”
- B. recognizing that the challenges and obstacles they may experience during bar prep had viable solutions, which were easier to see now while in a calm state rather than trying to figure them out while within the intensity of the moment.
- C. learning more about themselves and feeling relieved that by depending on their strengths, no matter where they lie, they can create a successful path to passing the bar exam.

REFERENCES

Sheldon, K. (2013). *Positive motivation: a six week course*. Positive Acorn.

VIA Institute on Character. (n.d.). *VIA Character Strengths Survey & Character Reports*. VIA Character Strengths Survey & Character Reports | VIA Institute. <https://www.viacharacter.org/>.

MY STRENGTHS-BASED BAR STUDY PLAN

There is no one-size-fits-all bar study plan. There is only *your* plan, and this three-part activity is designed to guide you through creating a bar study plan that is designed especially for you based on your strengths. The first two sections – Motivation Check-In and Your Personal Goal System – will help you to identify your motivations for taking the bar and to set weekly and monthly goals that support your ultimate goal of passing the bar exam. The final section leads you to creating your own personalized bar study plan, complete with what to do when you feel unmotivated or hit a roadblock and establishing your own bar study cheer team.

This is your journey to successfully passing the bar exam, and it starts *NOW!*

MOTIVATION CHECK-IN

This section of the Bar Study Plan is designed to help you identify your motivations for taking the bar exam. Be very honest with yourself here. The more extrinsic motivators you are able to identify now, the better position you will be in to reframe those motivators as goals you control rather than pursuing goals that are controlling you.

1. List all the different reasons for why you are taking the bar exam. Dig deep. Go all the way back to why you decided to become an attorney and go to law school.

2. What sources of motivation (extrinsic, introjected, identified, intrinsic) can you identify in your reasons?

3. For any motivation that is extrinsic or introjected, use the table below to reframe those goals from being extrinsically motivated to intrinsically motivated.

Extrinsic Goal (original)	Intrinsic Goal (reframed)

4. Think about a time when you had to engage in an activity you did not enjoy or want to do. What was your motivation for completing this activity? Why did you not want to do it? Was there anything you could have done to enjoy it more? Are there lessons from that experience that you can apply to your current experiences preparing for the bar exam?

YOUR PERSONAL GOAL SYSTEM

In this section, you will analyze your own personal goal system. Be honest with yourself here. To what degree are you motivated to spend the time and effort necessary to prepare for passing the bar exam? By identifying potential challenges and barriers now, you will be better able to overcome them as they happen.

5. In the table below, write 3 long-term goals (monthly) and 3 short-term goals (weekly) for your bar study plan.

Long-term Goals (monthly)	
1	
2	
3	
Short-term Goals (weekly)	
1	
2	
3	

6. How do your long-term goals and your short-term goals conflict with or help each other? Do your weekly, short-term goals provide a route to achieving your long-term goals? If not, readjust either your short-term goals or your long-term goals.

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YOUR BAR STUDY PLAN

You are now ready to build your Bar Study Plan! Be sure to have your Top 5 Strengths as identified by the VIA assessment available. You will use these to complete the table below.

What do I want to accomplish in my professional life?
How do I plan to accomplish this?
What do I need to do to increase my skills, resources, and opportunities to accomplish this?
What do I need to do on a daily basis to increase my skills, resources, and opportunities?

Return to the long-term and short-term goals you identified in Question 5 to complete the table below. Describe how your Top 5 Strengths can help you overcome challenges to your goals and in your bar study plan.

State the goal.
Identify any potential challenges and barriers related to this goal.
Identify strategies you can use when these situations arise to keep you on track.

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Finally, identify at least two people who are on your Bar Study Cheer Team and who you can contact when you are feeling unmotivated, anxious, frustrated, etc.

My Bar Study Cheer Team

Return to this Bar Study Plan as often as you need to remind you of your goals, your plan to achieve your goals, and your ideas for how to overcome possible challenges to goals and plan.