

If Your Goal Is Success, Don't Consult These Gurus

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For years, motivational speakers have celebrated a Yale study on why people succeed. It's powerful! Compelling! **Too bad it doesn't exist.**

The repertoire of consultants, trainers, and motivational speakers, nothing comes before the power of setting personal goals. And in the annals of personal goal-setting, no story outranks the Yale University Class of 1953.

The story, as told by consultants, goes like this: In 1953, researchers surveyed Yale's graduating seniors to determine how many of them had specific, written goals for their future. The answer: 3%. Twenty years later, researchers polled the surviving members of the Class of 1953 -- and found that the 3% with goals had accumulated more personal financial wealth than the other 97% of the class combined!

It's a consultant's dream anecdote: a vivid Ivy League success story that documents the cause-and-effect relationship between goals and personal success. It's powerful! It's compelling! It's also completely untrue -- as the Fast Company Consultant Debunking Unit (CDU) found out.

First stop: consultant Jay Rifenburg's 1995 book, *No Excuse!*, in which he cites the famous Yale story. Rifenburg couldn't document the study, but his researchers happily confirmed its proliferation across the consultant landscape: "We've attended hundreds of motivational seminars and heard it many times," say Mike and Marjie Markowski.

The CDU turned next to the reigning guru of personal achievement, chisel-jawed infomercial king Anthony Robbins. There, on page 200 of the 34th printing of his best-seller, *Unlimited Power*, Robbins writes, "The difference in people's abilities to fully tap their personal resources is directly affected by their goals. A study of the 1953 graduates of Yale University ... "

To find Robbins's source, the CDU contacted Robbins Research International (RRI) in La Jolla, California -- only to learn that the files concerning *Unlimited Power* had "met a disastrous end." RRI referred the CDU to personal effectiveness consultant Brian Tracy, who directed the CDU to the dean of motivational speakers, Zig Ziglar.

Sure enough, in the middle of his best-selling video, *Goals, Setting and Achieving Them on Schedule*, the evangelical Ziglar drops to his knees and cites -- you guessed it -- the study of the Class of 1953. "Those 3%," preaches Ziglar, "accomplished more than the 97% combined who had not set those goals."

But where had Ziglar found the study? It would be hard to pin down, explained a spokesperson from Ziglar's Dallas headquarters: "Mr. Ziglar is always reading. He reads more than two hours a day!" One possible source -- "Try Tony Robbins."

Instead, the CDU went directly to the source: retired lawyer Silas Spengler, secretary of the Class of 1953 since graduation. According to Spengler -- who listed his future occupation in the Yale yearbook as "personnel administration following a course of business administration at Harvard," and who instead went into the navy and then to law school -- he never wrote down any personal goals, nor did he and his classmates ever participate in a research study on personal goals.

As further evidence, Spengler provided excerpts from the 1953 yearbook. No one stated personal goals, but most of the graduates predicted their future lines of work: Roberto Goizueta, Coke's CEO, predicted his future would be with Cuba's *Compani Industrial del Tropic S.A.*; William Donaldson and Dan Lufkin, founders of Wall Street's Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette, forecast futures in law. Forrest Mars, Jr., now chairman and CEO of Mars, Inc., listed "no" for employment possibilities.

Finally the CDU went to Yale for the last word on the Class of 1953. Research Associate Beverly Waters reports that a recent outbreak of articles citing the study in publications as diverse as *Dental Economics* and *Success* magazines prompted her to undertake an exhaustive search of Yale alumni archives -- where she found no evidence that such a study had ever been conducted. Says Waters, "We are quite confident that the 'study' did not take place. We suspect it is a myth."

Not that hard evidence like that has ever stopped a consultant. From his Solana Beach, California office, consultant Brian Tracy responded to Waters's findings: "Heard this story originally from Zig Ziglar. If it's not true it should be."

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