



2026 BENCHMARK REPORT

The State of Goal Management 2026

How 210 companies really set, track, and quietly game their goals.

Based on 210 full-time employees at growing companies

92%

HAVE GAMED A GOAL

34%

GOALS CHANGE NOTHING

89%

HAVE SANDBAGGED

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Why Goals Get Gamed

Ask a team how their goals are doing and you'll hear "on track." Ask each person, privately, what they've done to their own goals — and the picture changes completely.

Most goal research measures process: how often teams check in, how many goals they set, which framework they use. None of it measures the thing every operator quietly knows is happening. Goals get padded, pre-achieved, written to impress, and abandoned without anyone saying so out loud.

This report measures it. We asked 210 full-time employees at growing companies a set of deliberately uncomfortable questions about what they do to their goals when no one is grading the answer. The findings are sharper than we expected. 92% admit to at least one form of goal-gaming. 89% have set a goal they'd already mostly hit. 34% say nothing about how they work would change if their goal tracker were deleted tomorrow.

The most revealing pattern isn't any single confession. It's that the behavior gets *worse*, not better, the more seriously a company treats its goals. Tie goals tightly to performance ratings and gaming climbs across every measure. The instinct to make goals "count" is quietly teaching people to manage the number instead of the work.

The organizations whose goals actually work in 2026 aren't the ones with stricter scoring or better templates. They're the ones that have made honesty the rational choice — where the true state of a goal is always visible, ambition is safe to admit, and no goal quietly disappears.

The Headline Findings

92%

of employees admit to at least one form of goal-gaming. Only 8% say they've never done any of it.

89%

set a goal they'd already mostly achieved

70%

reported a goal healthier than it was

50%

wrote a goal mainly to look good

43%

admit to all three at once

01 Goal-gaming is the norm, not the exception.

Across three independent behaviors — sandbagging, inflating progress, writing to impress — 92% admit to at least one. This isn't a fringe integrity problem; it's how goals are managed in practice.

02 The more a goal counts, the more it gets gamed.

When goals directly affect ratings, 96% sandbag and 60% write look-good goals. When goals are kept separate, those fall to 81% and 32%. The rating link is the strongest predictor of gaming in the data.

03 A third of goal systems are non-load-bearing.

34% say nothing about how they work would change if their goal tracker were deleted tomorrow. These goals exist, get updated, and influence nothing.

04 The people closest to goals game them most.

Goal owners write look-good goals at 63%, versus 45% for trackers and 32% for observers. Ownership doesn't reduce gaming — it concentrates it.

05 Goals quietly vanish — and that's when they stop mattering.

35% had goals last cycle that simply stopped being mentioned. Among those whose goals would change nothing if deleted, that jumps to 49%.

The Honesty Gap

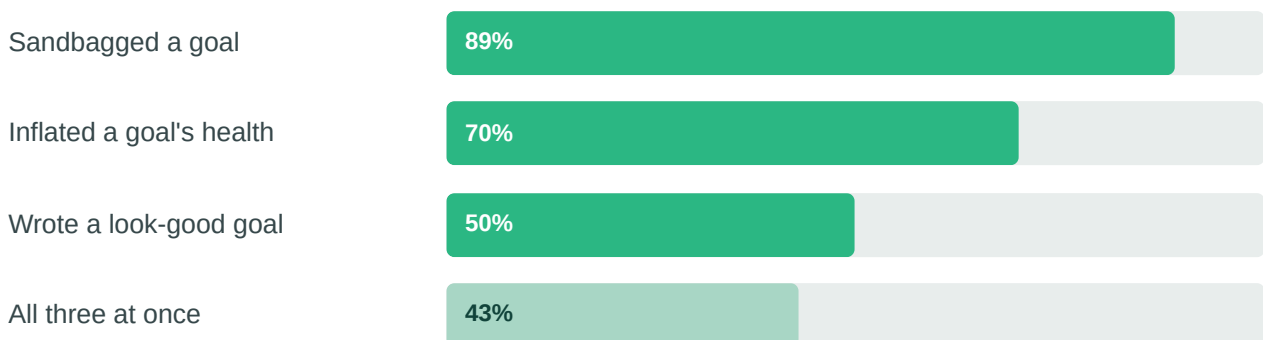
What people do to their goals when no one is grading the answer

92%

HAVE GAMED A GOAL

We asked about three distinct behaviors, each phrased to make admitting it feel ordinary rather than confessional. **Sandbagging**: setting a goal you've already mostly achieved. **Watermelon reporting**: showing a goal as healthier than you know it to be. And the **look-good goal**: writing an objective mainly to impress leadership rather than to change the work. Each came back high. Together, they describe a workforce managing the appearance of progress as much as progress itself.

SHARE OF EMPLOYEES ADMITTING EACH BEHAVIOR



Only 8% of employees say they've done none of the three. Goal-gaming isn't a minority integrity failure — it's the default behavior of people working inside systems that reward the number over the work.

1.1 Goals you can't name, you can only report on

The visibility data underneath tells the same story from another angle. Just 30% of employees can name *all* of their company's current top goals without looking them up, and 16% can name only one or none. A goal that can't be recalled can't be honestly pursued — it can only be performed at review time.

The Incentive Paradox

SANDBAG WHEN GOALS AFFECT RATINGS

The instinct to make goals "count" is the strongest driver of gaming

Conventional wisdom says goals work better when they carry weight — when hitting them affects how people are rated. The data says the opposite. As the link between goals and performance ratings tightens, every gaming behavior rises in lockstep. People don't try harder. They manage the number more carefully.

GAMING BEHAVIOR BY HOW TIGHTLY GOALS ARE TIED TO RATINGS

HOW GOALS CONNECT TO RATINGS	SANDBAG	INFLATE PROGRESS	WRITE TO IMPRESS
Directly affect ratings	96%	79%	60%
One factor among several	89%	70%	55%
Kept separate from ratings	81%	55%	32%
No individual goals	84%	63%	26%

The share writing goals mainly to impress leadership **nearly doubles** — from 32% to 60% — as goals move from kept-separate to directly affecting ratings. Tying goals to ratings doesn't raise the bar. It teaches people to set one they can clear.

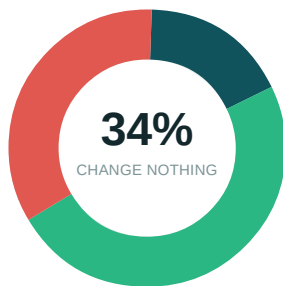
This is the report's central paradox. The mechanism most organizations reach for to make goals matter — accountability through performance reviews — is the same mechanism that quietly corrupts them. When a missed goal becomes a mark against you, the rational move is to set goals you've already hit and report the rest as healthier than they are.

Accountability without psychological safety doesn't produce honesty; it produces better-looking dishonesty.

The Load-Bearing Test

If your goal tracker vanished tomorrow, what would change?

A goal system is load-bearing when removing it would visibly change how people work. By that test, most aren't. Only 17% of employees say a lot would change if their goal document or tool disappeared. A third say nothing would.



- A lot would change 17%
- Some things would change 49%
- Honestly, nothing would change 34%

3.1 What separates load-bearing from decorative

The dividing line isn't tooling or framework. It's whether goals get a real ending. Among employees who say nothing would change if their tracker vanished, 49% had goals quietly disappear without a closing review last cycle. Among those who say a lot would change, only 14% did.

IF THE GOAL TRACKER VANISHED...	GOALS VANISHED WITHOUT REVIEW LAST CYCLE
Nothing would change	49%
A lot would change	14%

Goals stop being load-bearing the moment nothing happens when they end. A goal that can quietly vanish was never holding anything up — and people learn fast which goals those are.

The Recall Cliff

SAY NOTHING CHANGES

A goal no one can name, and no one watches, is already decorative

Section 3 showed that goals stop mattering when they can vanish without a closing review. Two earlier signals predict that fate before a cycle even ends: whether people can **name** their goals, and whether anyone **watches** them between reviews. Both separate load-bearing systems from decorative ones more sharply than tooling or framework does.

4.1 If they can't name it, it's already gone

Recall is the earliest warning sign. Among employees who can't name their company's current goals, 59% say nothing would change if the tracker disappeared. Among those who can name them all, just 24% say the same — a 35-point gap, wider than the rating link or the ownership split elsewhere in this report.

CAN THE EMPLOYEE NAME THEIR GOALS?	"NOTHING WOULD CHANGE IF DELETED"
Can't name them	59%
Can name all of them	24%

4.2 Goals only one person watches are the ones that rot

Visibility between reviews tells the same story. When nobody — or only the one person who maintains the tracker — checks goals between reviews, the share saying nothing would change and the share whose goals quietly vanished both climb to 45%. When the whole team watches, both fall to 27%.

WHO WATCHES GOALS BETWEEN REVIEWS?	NOTHING CHANGES / GOALS VANISHED
Nobody, or one maintainer	45% / 45%
The whole team	27% / 27%

A goal no one can name, and no one watches, is one no one is accountable for. Both signals show up before a cycle ends — which makes them the earliest warning that a goal has already stopped mattering.

Who Games Most

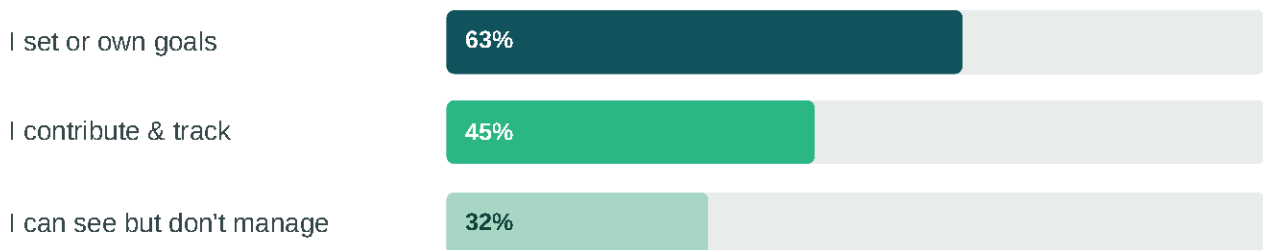
63%

OF OWNERS WRITE TO IMPRESS

The closer someone sits to the goal system, the more they game it

It would be comforting to find that gaming is done by people on the edges — those forced to report on goals they didn't set. The data says the reverse. The behavior concentrates among the people who own goals: the ones the system trusts most.

HAVE WRITTEN A LOOK-GOOD GOAL, BY RELATIONSHIP TO GOALS



Goal owners are **nearly twice as likely** as observers to admit writing a goal mainly to impress leadership. Ownership doesn't immunize against gaming — it's where gaming originates, because owners have both the incentive and the authorship to shape how a goal looks.

This reframes a common assumption. Organizations often respond to weak goal cultures by pushing ownership further down — more people writing their own goals, more buy-in. But authorship without a system that surfaces honest progress just hands more people the means to manage appearances. Ownership is necessary. On its own, it is not enough.

SECTION 6

What Honest Goal Systems Do Differently

A data-informed profile of companies where goals are load-bearing

These aren't theoretical best practices. They're the conditions that separate the goal systems people actually work against from the ones they merely report on.

Visibility	Every employee can name the company's top goals unprompted. Goals that can't be recalled can only be reported on.
Incentive design	Goals inform performance conversations without becoming a pass/fail verdict — so ambition stays safe to admit.
Continuous truth	Progress is visible as work happens, not assembled the night before a review. A watermelon goal can't survive to quarter-end.
A real ending	Every goal gets a closing review — a retro, a manager conversation, a resource decision. Goals never quietly vanish.
Honest ownership	Owners write their own goals inside a system that surfaces real progress, so authorship drives commitment, not impression management.
Load-bearing by design	Removing the system would visibly change how people work — because goals connect to daily decisions, not just the quarterly scorecard.

THREE QUESTIONS EVERY LEADERSHIP TEAM SHOULD ANSWER

If we deleted our goal tracker tomorrow, what would actually change about how teams work this week?

Where does it become rational for someone to set a goal they've already hit — and what would make honesty the safer choice?

When a goal goes off track or quietly ends, what consistently happens next? If the answer is "nothing," it was never load-bearing.

Where Does Your Organization Stand?

Rate yourself honestly across six dimensions. 1 = early stage, 5 = high performance.

DIMENSION	WHAT YOU'RE SCORING	YOUR RATING
Visibility	From goals nobody can recall (1) to every employee naming them unprompted (5)	1 2 3 4 5
Incentive Design	From rating-or-nothing pressure (1) to ambition that's safe to admit (5)	1 2 3 4 5
Continuous Truth	From progress assembled before reviews (1) to honest state visible live (5)	1 2 3 4 5
A Real Ending	From goals quietly vanishing (1) to a closing review every time (5)	1 2 3 4 5
Honest Ownership	From look-good authorship (1) to ownership inside an honest system (5)	1 2 3 4 5
Load-Bearing	From nothing would change if deleted (1) to goals drive daily work (5)	1 2 3 4 5

Total
/30

25–30 High Performance — goals are honest and load-bearing.

16–24 Developing — clear leverage points visible in your low scores.

Below 16 At Risk — start with the Action Plan on the next page.

Four Moves, In Order of Impact

Data-backed. Prioritized. Starting next quarter.

1

HIGHEST IMPACT · INCENTIVES

Decouple goals from the verdict.

The tighter goals are bound to ratings, the more they get gamed. Keep goals as informed context for performance conversations, not a pass/fail score. The aim is to make ambition safe to admit — so people set goals they might miss instead of ones they've already hit.

2

QUICK WIN · VISIBILITY

Make the real state always visible.

Watermelon goals survive because their true health is only assembled at review time. When progress is visible continuously, a goal can't be quietly inflated to quarter-end. Move updates out of the pre-review scramble and into the flow of the work.

3

CULTURAL · ENDINGS

Give every goal a real ending.

Goals stop mattering the moment they can vanish without consequence. Name what happens when a goal closes — a retro, a manager conversation, a resource decision — and make it happen every time. Consistency is what makes a goal load-bearing.

4

PEOPLE · OWNERSHIP

Pair ownership with honest progress.

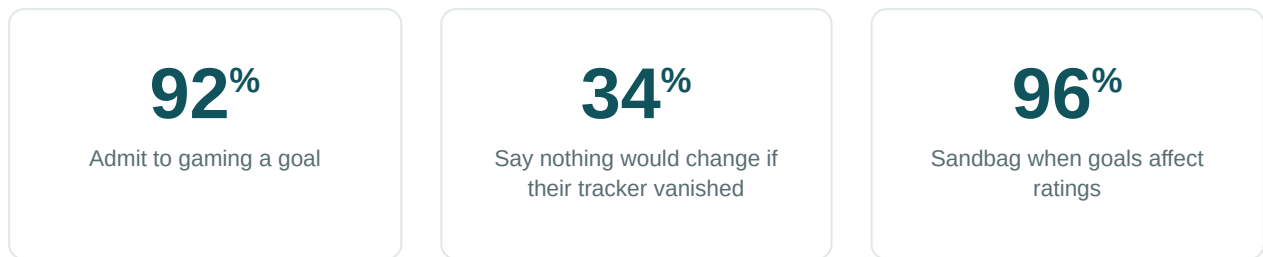
Owners game most, because authorship without honest visibility hands them the means to manage appearances. Keep ownership — it drives commitment — but put it inside a system that surfaces real progress, so owners are rewarded for truth, not polish.

Conclusion

The Honesty Gap

The companies whose goals actually work in 2026 don't have better templates or stricter scoring. They have more honest systems — where the truthful state of a goal is always visible, ambition is safe to admit, and a goal can't quietly disappear.

Everyone else is running goal systems their own people quietly game. Not out of bad faith, but because the incentives reward it: tie a goal to a rating and the rational move is to make it look good. The result is a workforce managing appearances on a dashboard nobody fully trusts.



None of the fixes are exotic. Visible progress, safe ambition, real endings, honest ownership — these are operating disciplines, not features. Closing the honesty gap is where the next generation of goal performance is hiding.

METHODOLOGY

About This Research

An independent survey of how people actually manage their goals.

The State of Goal Management 2026 is based on survey responses from 210 full-time employed people at growing companies, all of whom confirmed active involvement in their organization's goal-setting or tracking before completing the survey. Questions were framed to make admitting common behaviors feel ordinary, reducing the social-desirability bias that suppresses honest answers on integrity-adjacent topics.

Total respondents	210
Employment status	All full-time employed
Company size	101–200 employees
Goal involvement	All confirmed active involvement
Survey period	2026

A note on the data

All findings are self-reported and reflect respondents' own assessment of their goal behavior. Results describe association, not cause. No OKRs Tool customers were included, and the research was fielded independently of any product. Respondents were drawn from the general full-time workforce rather than goal-methodology specialists — because the report measures how goals are managed in ordinary companies, not how specialists believe they should be.

ABOUT



OKRs Tool is goal-setting built for growing companies that want goals to actually work — without the bloat of enterprise software or the chaos of spreadsheets. Every feature exists to close the honesty gap this report measures.

• Always-Visible Progress

The real state of every goal is on screen as work happens — so it can't be quietly inflated to quarter-end.

• Built-In Check-In Flows

Lightweight weekly updates that move progress out of the pre-review scramble and into the work.

• Clear Ownership Everywhere

Every key result has an owner, inside a system that surfaces honest progress instead of rewarding polish.

• A Real Ending Every Cycle

Closing reviews built into the cycle, so goals never quietly vanish without consequence.

• Set Up in an Afternoon

Guided onboarding gets your first goal cycle live fast. No consultants required.

• Hierarchical Alignment

Connect every team goal to a company objective and see the whole thing roll up in one map.

Start building goals people don't have to game.

Start Free at [OKRsTool.com](https://www.OKRsTool.com) →