

Setting SMART Objectives

Nothing happens until we plan. Good plans have goals and objectives. Setting goals and objectives correctly goes a long way towards their achievement. Before diving into how we go about setting SMART objectives we need to be aware of the difference between *goals* and *objectives*. Goals relate to our aspirations, purpose and vision. For example, you may have a goal of becoming financially independent. Objectives are the battle plan, the stepping stones on the path towards the achievement of your goal. Therefore, a goal may have one or many objectives.

One well known method for setting objectives is the SMART way. The SMART approach is well understood among managers, but sometimes poorly practiced. SMART refers to the acronym that describes the key characteristics of meaningful objectives, which are **S**pecific (concrete, detailed, well defined), **M**easurable (numbers, quantity, comparison), **A**chievable (feasible, actionable), **R**ealistic (considering resources) and **T**ime-Bound (a defined time line).

Specific

Specific means that the objective is concrete, detailed, focused and well defined. Specific means that its results and action-oriented. Objective must be straightforward and emphasize action and the required outcome. Objectives need to communicate what you would like to see happen. To help set specific objectives it helps to ask:

- **WHAT** are we going to do? These are best written using strong, action verbs such as conduct, develop, build, plan, execute, etc. This helps your objective to be action orientated and focuses on what's most important.
- **WHY** is this important to do?
- **WHO** is going to do what? Who else need to be involved?
- **WHEN** do we want this to be completed?
- **HOW** are we going to do this?

Diagnostic Questions

- What exactly are we going to do, with or for whom?
- What strategies will be used?
- Is the objective well understood?
- Is the objective described with action verbs?
- Is it clear who is involved?
- Is it clear where this will happen?
- Is it clear what needs to happen?
- Is the outcome clear?
- Will this objective lead to the desired results?

Achievable

Objectives need to be achievable. If the objective is too far in the future, you'll find it difficult to keep motivated. Objectives need to stretch you, but not so far that you become frustrated and lose motivation. You shouldn't commit to objectives that are not do-able considering resources and your timeframe.

Diagnostic Questions

- Can we get it done in the proposed timeframe?
- Do we understand the limitations and constraints?
- Can we do this with the resources we have?
- Has anyone else done this successfully?
- Is this possible?

Realistic

Objectives that are achievable may not be realistic. Realistic means that you have the resources to get it done. The achievement of an objective requires resources such as: staffing, skills, money, equipment, etc. Most objectives are achievable but may require a change in your priorities to make them happen.

Diagnostic Questions

- Do we have the resources available to achieve this objective?
- Do we need to revisit priorities to make this happen?
- Is it possible to achieve this objective?

Measurable

If the objective is measurable, the measurement source is identified and we are able to track our actions as we progress towards the objective. Measurement is the standard used for comparison. **If you can't measure it, you can't manage it! Or evaluate it!** It's important to have measures that will encourage and motivate you on the way. This may require interim measures. Measurements help us to know when we have achieved our objective.

Diagnostic Questions

- How will I know that the change has occurred?
- Can these measurements be obtained?

Time-Bound

Time-bound means setting deadlines for the achievement of the objective. Deadlines need to be both achievable and realistic. If you don't set a time you will reduce the motivation and urgency required to execute the tasks. Timeframes create the necessary urgency and prompts action.

Diagnostic Questions

- When will this objective be accomplished?
- Is there a stated deadline?

When you set objectives, the activities you choose to meet your goal should also reflect SMART values. For instance, if one activity is providing staff training, you should have a list of topics to be covered, assign a trainer and commit to a due date for completion. This makes each of your activities specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound.

“There's a difference between interest and commitment. When you're interested in doing something, you do it only when circumstance permit. When you're committed to something, you accept no excuses, only results.” – Unknown

