Use SMART Objectives to Focus Goals, Plans and Performance

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What's so smart about SMART? Why has this acronym become part of the vocabulary of project planning and performance management?

Objectives that are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Aligned, Realistic/Relevant, and Time-bound) are likely to be achieved. When generic, off-the shelf objectives get the SMART treatment, they emerge as targets that engage focus, action, feedback and learning. These targets assist development of individual work plans, and also provide a guidance system for supervisor-staff performance review discussions.

How Do You Write a SMART Objective Statement?

First, you must decide exactly what you expect to create, and how you will recognise it when it comes to be. Now put it in words: "Our Internet Marketing system produces a minimum of $3500 per month in product sales by 31 July 2009, with a quarterly increase of at least 5% thereafter." The Specific, Measurable, and Time-bound aspects are built into one short declaration.

Will it happen? Much depends on whether your objective is aligned with things that really matter to you (and your organisation), and whether you can commit the resources to bring it about. In individuals and in organisations, resource distribution often reflects past priorities and requirements. As you develop your SMART objective, step back and compare proposed results with existing commitments in the larger organisation or systems you serve. This broader perspective can help you decide if:

1. Your proposed result is consistent with and directly relevant to larger strategic goals and desired outcomes, and
2. Your proposed result has such great pay-off potential that it is worth the resource investment it requires.

Taking on a new initiative usually means that something else must go. If you discover that current investments are not producing the gains you had hoped for, you know where you can harvest resources for endeavours you believe will be more fruitful.

Now that your objective embodies the "Alignment" and "Realistic/Relevant" aspects of SMART, you are ready to use it as a target for work plans.

Using SMART Objectives for Feedback and Learning

In complex systems, feedback is the process of comparing a target state with current conditions to signal and control the need for adjustment. A thermostat, for example, provides feedback that enables the heating system to maintain its target temperature.

In teams and organisations, feedback involves regular check-ins to compare anticipated results with current progress. Monitoring progress can be as simple as asking yourself these three questions:

1. Am I doing what I planned?
2. Is my work having the impact I anticipated (producing or moving toward the result targets established by my objectives)?
3. Are changes needed in my plan?
These common-sense questions are the basis for fruitful self assessment, performance review discussions, and organisational learning about what works to produce desired results.

Although the questions are straightforward, it may be tough to collect the data that will give you accurate and actionable answers.

That's where your SMART objective comes in. A SMART objective includes measures that you can track to gauge progress. In the Internet Marketing objective cited above, the measure of success is monthly sales income. In order to collect this data, you must have a systematic means of logging sales by date and tracking their source. If your current systems cannot do this, change them to provide these data or find another measure of success.

At their heart, SMART objectives contain the potential to focus attention, work plans, and commitment to performance targets. Because meaningful and practical measures are built in, SMART objectives also enable feedback and learning that can keep you on track to success.

By Susan Berry and Randy Thomas - The "Working Together" Team. If you would like to learn more about creating and using SMART objectives to achieve individual, team, or organisational outcomes, visit www.consultingtipsandtools.com and the consult, facilitate, or coach sections of www-aligned4results.com.

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