

WRITING SMARTER OBJECTIVES

Fact Sheet

It's that time of year again.

You sit down with one of your team members to discuss objectives.

You get your excuses in early;

"Listen, you know HR make me set these right?"

You see their face change; they know what's coming.

You turn the page and deliver the first uninspiring objective, something like; "Improve customer service"

Sadly, lots of us have had an experience like this.



For things to change, leaders and managers need to get the process of setting objectives right.

Too often we don't spend enough time clarifying what we're really aiming to do before we move to action.

It's all too easy to set objectives that are so general that we don't know exactly what we're trying to achieve, or whether we've achieved it.

A structured approach forces us to think more deeply and methodically about what we actually want. Perhaps the best known of these approaches is the SMART acronym.

In this factsheet, we'll explore the meaning behind the acronym, and show you how to write objectives that inspire and motivate.

SMART HISTORY

The idea of SMART objectives is often credited to Peter Druker and his 1954 book "The Practice of Management". But interestingly, there's no direct reference to SMART in the book.

It wasn't until November 1981, in a publication called Management Review, the term was first documented.

Since then, the SMART acronym has come to mean different things to different people.

In this course we'll focus on one of the most popular concepts, where SMART is an acronym for:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Relevant
- Time-bound

Later in the course, we'll discuss how the system can be improved further by adding the letters E and R, but for now, let's take a look behind the acronym so you understand exactly what it means.

SPECIFIC



You need to be specific.

Objectives must tell a team or individual exactly what's expected, why it's important, who's involved, where it's going to happen and which resources or limits are involved.

These are known as the five "W" questions.

In most cases only some of these will be relevant but you should mentally check through all of them to make sure that you are not missing anything.

The real aim here is that an observable action, behaviour or achievement is described, which is linked to a rate, number, percentage or frequency.

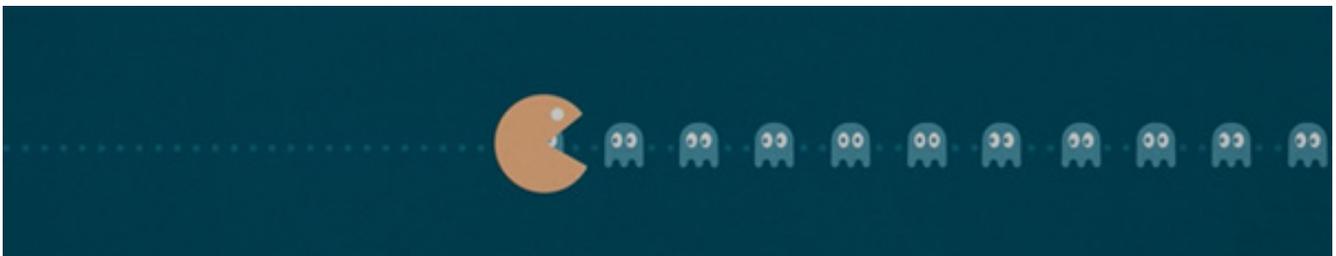
To demonstrate how this works, let's imagine you want to buy a new car.

A general or vague objective might sound like: "I want to save enough money to buy a car".

There's no rate, number, percentage or frequency.

A more specific objective would be, "I will save £500 a month for x months until I can buy a car by x date".

MEASURABLE



Imagine you're playing a game and it doesn't show a score or progress indication as you go along.

You'd quickly lose interest as there's no motivation to keep playing.

Objective setting is similar.

Make sure you tell the person how you're going to measure success.

Then you both know when it hasn't been achieved, when it's been met, and when it's been exceeded.

ACHIEVABLE

Objectives need to be achievable. They can be stretching, but should not be impossible.

There's no better way to kill enthusiasm and motivation, than by setting unachievable objectives.

But be careful, setting objectives that are too easy can be just as dispiriting.

Instead, set objectives that stretch abilities, but still remain possible.



RELEVANT

Relevant objectives tick two boxes.

They make sure the objective being set is something the individual can actually impact upon or change.

And secondly, is the objective important to the organisation?

Consider if you were to set an objective for the maintenance manager to increase market share over the next financial quarter; it's not actually something they can do anything about. It's not relevant.

But if you set an objective to reduce expenditure on cleaning materials by £100 over the next two months, it is entirely relevant to them.



TIME-BOUND



What is the time frame for achieving the objective?

A target date and some milestones help to keep things on track and create a sense of urgency.

Failing to set a deadline reduces the motivation and the urgency of those required to perform the tasks.

To help, ask yourself these questions:

Are the time lines you have established realistic?

Will other competing demands cause delay?

And will you be able to overcome those demands to accomplish the objective you've set in the time frame you've established?

TALKING SMART

Remember the objective at the beginning of this course:

“Provide good customer service”.

One of the main reasons it's such a rubbish objective, is the language used.

But how can you turn that airy-fairy jumble of words into an objective that can make a real difference?

Meet ACTION verb.



Action verbs are the real superheroes of the objective setting world. Their mission is to save people from vague objectives!

Action verbs are effective because they're observable and make it easier to communicate intent: verbs like increase, write, conduct, create, produce and so on.

Let's take a look at Action-verb at work, doing what he does best, saving boring objectives.

Take our boring, uninspiring objective, “Provide good customer service”.

Using what we've learnt about SMART objectives, and our new friend Action-verb, we can instantly transform this objective into something that will motivate employees.

It now reads,

“Increase your customer service satisfaction score to 90% this quarter”.

People want to be a part of something. They want something more than an uninspiring, vague objective. They want to be involved in a real mission.

Think about it, which objective do you think would get better results, the old style or the SMART version?

Talk SMART by using action verbs, and avoid jargon words and phrases that can be misleading or ambiguous.

SMARTER OBJECTIVES

So you're now familiar with the SMART acronym.

But there is a way to further extend the concept to recognise the importance of engagement.

You add the letters E & R, to get SMARTER objectives.

As with SMART, there are different variations of what the letters stand for.

But whichever you choose to use, the key advantage in using SMARTER is that it helps you to recognise the importance of engaging the individual.

The more motivated people are by their objective, the better they are likely to perform.

Take some time to read through the different versions of ER and see which ones jump out at you:

Exciting:

The objective you set should be engaging for the individual. When a person is excited by the objective or the journey they are more likely to apply themselves and be successful.

Rewarding:

A person should know what it will mean and what will result from investing full effort in completing the goal.

Recorded:

There is a written record of the objective, its constraints and the enablers required for success. Having the objective written is said to help increase the likelihood of completion and success, at the very least it ensures that both parties have a common understanding of what was agreed.

Extending:

The goal should stretch the performer's capabilities or make a significant contribution to the mission and purpose of the organisation. It's boring and can seem purposeless if it doesn't.

FINAL SUMMARY

So there you have it. You've reached the end of the factsheet.

We really hope you've picked up some new techniques that inspire you to look at objective setting in a different way.

Yes, setting objectives can be intimidating, but it doesn't have to be. Not now you have a system.

Have fun with it, and enjoy writing your next objectives in a smarter way.