

Setting SMART Objectives Checklist 231



Introduction

Objectives set out what a business is trying to achieve. It is important for leaders and managers to get the process of setting objectives right, as inadequately formulated objectives could guide an individual, a team or an organisation in the wrong direction. Specific and measurable objectives provide a definition of the success of a project or initiative. Achievable and realistic objectives engage and motivate individuals. Time-bound objectives ensure that all stakeholders agree when it is to be achieved.

SMART is an acronym that has been credited to both Peter Drucker (1955) and G.T.Doran (1991), though it is difficult to identify whether either of these two were really the first people to use the term 'SMART' with reference to objectives. The term SMART is now in common usage among managers who use SMART to set objectives within appraisal and performance management systems.

SMART i.e. specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely

- **Specific** – outline in a clear statement precisely what is required.
- **Measurable** – include a measure to enable you to monitor progress and to know when the objective has been achieved.
- **Achievable** – objectives can be designed to be challenging, but it is important that failure is not built into objectives. Employees and managers should agree to the objectives to ensure commitment to them.
- **Realistic** - focus on outcomes rather than the means of achieving them
- **Timely** - (or time-bound) – agree the date by which the outcome must be achieved.

Definition

An objective is a statement which describes what an individual, team or organisation is hoping to achieve. Objectives are 'SMART' if they are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and, timely (or time-bound).

Action checklist

1. Specific

Objectives should be specific. They should specifically describe the result that is desired in a way that is, detailed, focused and well defined.

To be specific an objective should have a description of a precise or specific behaviour, achievement or outcome which is or can be related to a percentage, frequency, rate or number.

To increase specificity when writing objectives use verbs which are action-orientated to describe those actions which need to be taken to fulfill objectives.

Action verbs include:

- analyse
- apply
- change
- create
- determine
- differentiate
- identify
- perform

Avoid jargon, words and phrases which are (or can be construed as) misleading or ambiguous such as:

- be aware of
- have an awareness of
- be prepared for a variety of

To help set specific objectives ask:

- What are we going to do, with or for whom?
- How will this be done and what strategies will be used?
- Why is this important to do?
- Is the objective (or objectives) understood?
- Is the objective (or objectives) described with action verbs?
- Who is going to be responsible for what and do we need anyone else to be involved?
- Where this will happen?
- When do we want this to be completed?
- What needs to happen?
- Is the outcome clear?
- Will this objective lead to the desired results?

2. Measurable

Measurement is hugely important and will enable you to know that the objective has been achieved because evidence is available derived from a system, method or procedure which has tracked and recorded the behaviour or action upon which the objective is focused.

Consider:

- How will I know that the change has occurred?
- Can these measurements be obtained? (It is worth noting that if it can't be measured now, the chances are that it won't be possible to measure in the future either).

3. Achievable

Objectives need to be achievable. They can be stretching but not unachievable. Ask whether, with a reasonable amount of effort and application, the objective is achievable.

An objective is achievable if:

- you know that it is measurable
- others have already done it
- it is in principle possible (it is clearly not unachievable)
- the necessary resources are available, or there is a realistic chance of getting them
- the limitations have been assessed.

Setting objectives that are unachievable will lessen motivation and lead to people applying little or no energy or enthusiasm to what they see as a futile task. Setting objectives at too low a level can be just as dispiriting.

Recognise that by declaring an objective to be achievable you may be making a commitment to provide a level of resources (staff, money) without which the objective would not be achievable, implying that in changed circumstances the objective would no longer be SMART for the individual, team or organisation.

4. Realistic

Whilst objectives should be realistic this does not mean that they need to be easy. They can stretch individuals, teams or organisations responsible for the achievement of the objectives. Objectives can be set which are demanding but not so much that the chance of success is small. Realistic objectives take into account the available resources such as, skills, funding, and equipment.

You need to know:

- Is it possible to achieve this objective?
- Who is going to do it?
- Do they have the necessary skills to do the task well?
- Where is the funding coming from?
- Are the resources to achieve this objective available?
- Who will bear responsibility for what?

5. Timely / (or time-bound)

A deadline, date or time when the objective will be accomplished or completed is necessary and must be included so as to make the objective measurable.

A deadline helps to create the necessary urgency, prompts action and focuses the minds of those who are accountable for the commitments that they have made through the objectives. Not setting a deadline reduces the motivation and the urgency of those required to perform the tasks.

Ask yourself if the objective can be accomplished within the deadlines which have been established, bearing in mind other possible competing demands which may cause delay.

The objective setting process can seem intimidating but it doesn't necessarily need to be as it can be as simple as sitting down with the departmental objectives and considering how these objectives can be met. From the answer to the question comes the foundation for setting the objectives. Everyone within the organisation should have a clear understanding of the objectives as well as an awareness of their own roles and responsibilities in achieving them.

Managers should avoid:

- failing to set objectives which are specific
- having no system, method or procedure in place to track and record the behaviour or action upon which the objective is focused
- setting objectives which are unachievable
- setting objectives which are unrealistic
- not having time-frames for the achievement of the objective or objectives
- setting deadlines which are neither achievable or realistic.
- failing to remember that situations change and therefore individuals may need to return to renegotiate objectives if situations make them less certain or impossible

National Occupational Standards for Management and Leadership

This checklist has relevance for the following standards:
B Providing direction, units 5, 6, 7, 9

Additional resources

Books

Target setting and goal achievement, Richard Hale and Peter Whitlam
London: Kogan Page, 1995

Goals and goal setting: planning to succeed, Larrie A Rouillard
London: Kogan Page, 1994

Goal analysis, 2nd ed, Robert F Mager
London: Kogan Page, 1991

Management excellence: productivity through MBO, Heinz Wehrich
New York NY: McGraw Hill, 1985

The practice of management, Peter Drucker
London: Heinemann, 1955

This is a selection of books available for loan to members from CMI's library. More information at:
www.managers.org.uk/library

Related checklist

Setting objectives (052)

Related model

SMART objectives

Internet resources

This SMART task template assists with the writing of objectives which conform to the SMART criteria
www.businessballs.com/delegationsmarttaskform.pdf

This is one of many checklists available to all CMI members. For more information please contact

t: 01536 204222

e: enquiries@managers.org.uk

w www.managers.org.uk

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