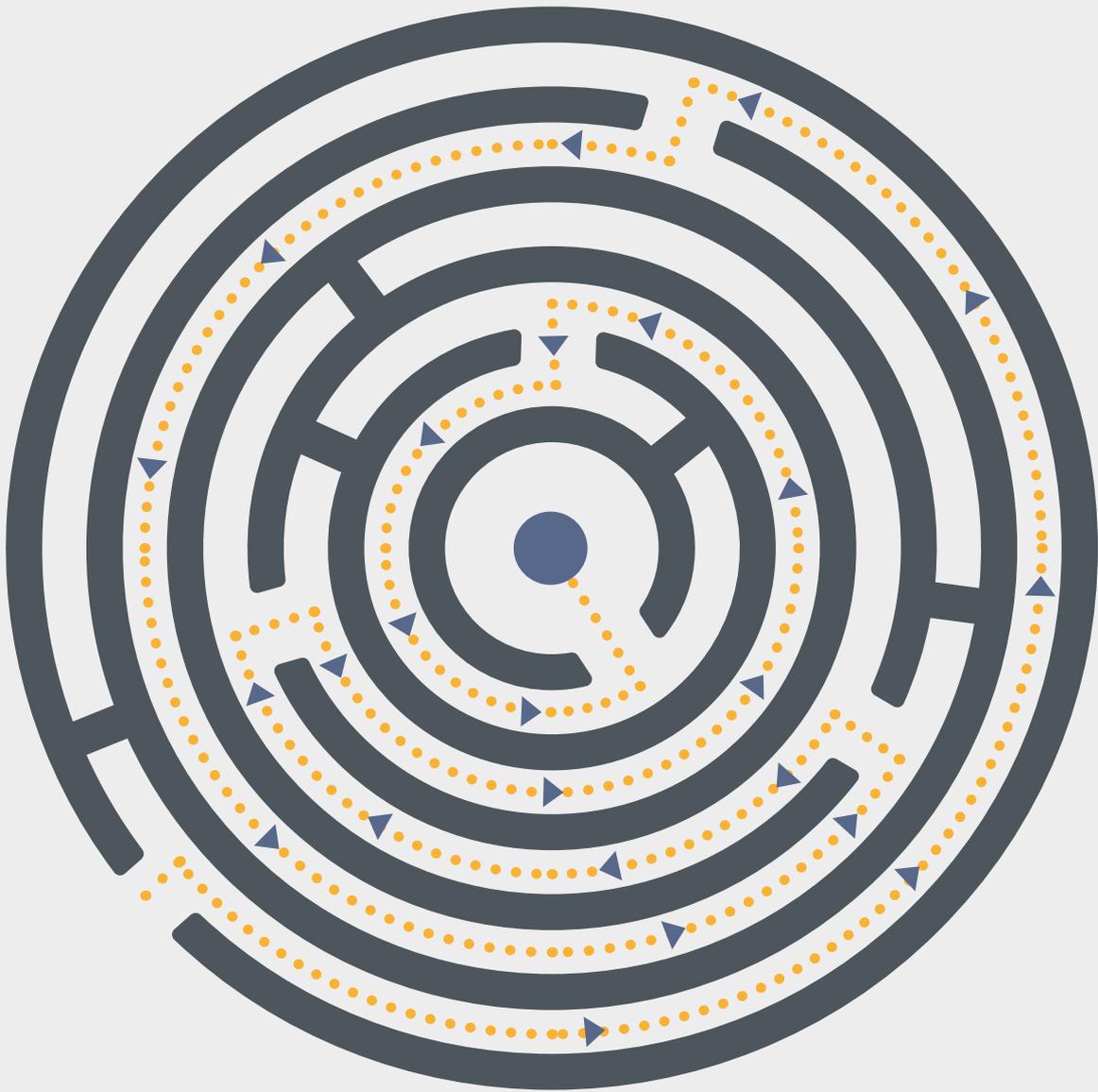

Manager's Quick Guide: Managing People
SETTING SMART OBJECTIVES



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Introduction

Objectives set out what a business is trying to achieve. They should be based on organisational strategy and be aligned with corporate vision, mission and values. Objectives may be set at the level of the whole organisation or at divisional, department, team or individual levels.

Lower level objectives and project objectives should ideally relate to one of more of the corporate level objectives. Leaders and managers need to get the process of setting objectives right, as inadequately formulated objectives can cause confusion or lead individuals, teams or the whole organisation in the wrong direction. The process of objective setting can seem intimidating but this is not necessarily the case. It can be as simple as sitting down with the departmental objectives and considering how these objectives can be met. The answer to this question will lay the foundation for setting specific objectives for individuals.

The SMART acronym is a tool designed to help organisations and individuals set objectives in an effective and productive manner. Specific and measurable objectives define the success of a project or initiative. Achievable and realistic objectives engage and motivate individuals. Time-bound objectives ensure that all stakeholders agree time scales for the achievement of objectives.

Both Peter Drucker (1955) and G.T.Doran (1991) have been credited with developing the model, although it is difficult to be certain whether either of these two were really the first people to use the term 'SMART' with reference to objectives. The concept of SMART objectives is commonly used by managers to set individual objectives within appraisal and performance management systems. Like many models, SMART has been criticised and a number of variations have been proposed. These include SMARTER which adds Evaluated and Reviewed (or Rewarded) to the traditional framework.

Definition

An objective is a statement which describes what an individual, team or organisation is hoping to achieve. There are a number of different versions of the acronym with different terms associated with some of the letters as indicated below.

Objectives are 'SMART' if they are specific, measurable, achievable, (sometimes agreed), realistic (or relevant) and time-bound, (or timely).

SMART i.e. specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound

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

Action checklist

1. Specific

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

The following questions may be helpful in formulating specific objectives:

- What outcomes are we looking for?
- Is it clear what the objective means?
- How will this be achieved and what strategies will be followed?
- What needs to happen?
- What are we going to do, with or for whom?
- Who will be responsible for what and do we need anyone else to be involved?
- When do we want this to be completed?

When writing objectives, especially for individuals, use action-orientated verbs which describe what needs to be done to achieve the objectives.

For examples:

- analyse
- apply
- change
- create
- determine
- differentiate
- identify
- instigate
- 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.

2. Measurable

Measurement is hugely important because it will enable you to know whether an objective has been achieved. To be measurable an objective should describe an achievement or outcome which is or can be related to a percentage, a frequency, rate or number. Evidence will need to be derived from a system, method or procedure which has tracked and recorded the outcomes related to the objective.

To help in setting measurable outcomes, think about the desired outcome and which elements can be measured. Consider whether there is any scope for cross-comparison. For example: if the objective is to increase sales in a certain area, it is a simple matter to check whether sales have changed in that area. However, if sales are changing in all areas, you will need to show that the increase is related to actions related to the objective, rather than as part of a general trend.

Consider these questions:

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

3. Achievable (or agreed)

An objective can be said to be achievable if the necessary resources are available or similar results have been achieved by others in similar circumstances.

Questions to consider include:

- Who will carry out the actions required?
- Do they have the necessary skills to do the task well?

- Are the resources (personnel, funding, time, equipment etc.) to achieve this objective available or can they be obtained?
- Who will bear responsibility for what?

'Achievable' implies that those to whom it is assigned are willing and able to achieve it. If objectives are seen to be unachievable those responsible for them are likely to lose motivation and become demoralised. Individuals will be unwilling to invest energy and enthusiasm into something which they do not believe to be possible. For this reason it is vital to discuss objectives, especially those relating to individuals and reach agreement on them.

Recognise that agreeing that an objective is achievable may involve a commitment to provide a level of resources (staff, money, time) without which the objective would not be achievable. This implies that in changed circumstances the objective would no longer be SMART for the individual, team or organisation.

Bear in mind that setting objectives too low can also lead to demotivation and disillusionment. Stretching objectives provide an incentive to put effort and commitment into finding ways to reach the target. Most people will rise to a challenge as long as it is not excessive.

4. Realistic (or relevant)

The concepts of 'realistic' and 'achievable' are similar and this may explain why some use the term 'relevant' as an alternative. 'Realistic' suggests that there is a clear understanding of how the objective might be reached; that there are no circumstances or factors which would make the achievement of the objective impossible or unlikely; and that any potential obstacles and constraints have been taken into account. 'Relevant' suggests that the objectives set are appropriate to the individual or team and their job role and function or at organisational level that they align with the overall purpose and strategy of the organisation.

5. Timely (or time-bound)

It is necessary to set a date or time by which the objective should have been accomplished or completed and this contributes to making objectives measurable. For objectives that may take weeks or even months to fully achieve it is good practice to identify milestones or key steps and to set deadlines for these to help keep progress towards the end objective on track. 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 in agreeing to the objectives. Not setting deadlines will reduce levels of urgency and motivation and may result in unnecessary delays or failure to reach the objectives.

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

6. Communicate objectives

Whenever possible, objectives, especially those at organisational level should be made public and communicated to colleagues, employees, teams, even customers or suppliers. Everyone in the organisation should have a clear understanding of organisational objectives as well as an awareness of their own part in achieving them. This will help to involve those not directly responsible for achieving the objectives and will also alert people to changes which may affect them.

Potential pitfalls

Managers should avoid:

- setting objectives which are not specific
- setting objectives which are unachievable
- setting deadlines which are neither achievable or realistic
- having no system, method or procedure in place to track and record actions and progress towards achieving goals
- not having time-frames for the achievement of the objective or objectives
- forgetting that situations change and that it may be necessary to review and amend or renegotiate objectives if circumstances make them less certain or impossible.

Additional resources

Books

The Financial Times essential guide to leading your team: how to set goals, measure performance and reward talent, Graham Yemm
Harlow: Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2012

This book is also available as an e-book. (See especially Chapter 5, Setting the direction for your team.)

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

Journal articles

Set realistic goals and meet them, Robert Kelsey

Training Journal, July 2011, pp 55-58

Who put the ART in SMART goals?, John Chamberlain

Management Services, Autumn vol 55 no 3, pp 22-27

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



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