

EXECUTIVE EDGE

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For twenty-seven years, the Executive Edge has been a value added service to support our employers and candidates in their Personal & Professional Development.



Beyond SMART Goals: How to Build Better Results

By Joe Hunt

Just about everyone has used some version of SMART goals. This is a mnemonic acronym for setting goals that are:

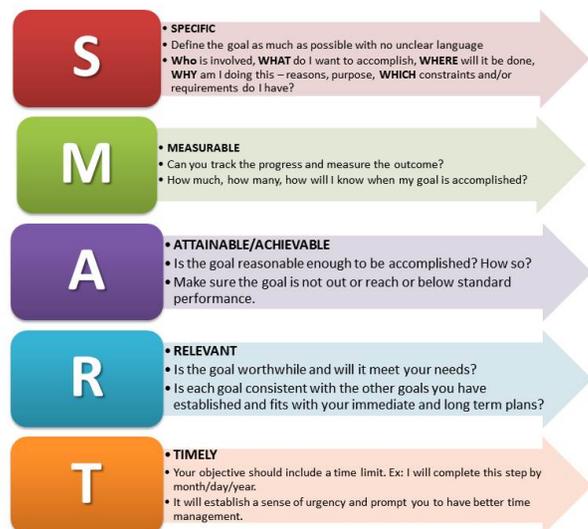
- ✓ Specific
- ✓ Measurable
- ✓ Achievable
- ✓ Realistic
- ✓ Time bound

Using the SMART system makes it easier to stay on track and accomplish key success factors. There are a couple of variants; the idea is that setting specific objectives along with details for completion ensures that goals are realistic, measurable, and achievable within a required time frame.

But there are problems with using the SMART goal-setting system. When do SMART goals fail? When people rush toward decisions simply because they have a high need for closure, missteps are more likely to happen.

In the rush to check a goal off a list, some personalities make mistakes such as denying, misinterpreting, or suppressing information that is inconsistent with the requirements for a task. When overly focused on feeling productive, one can become blind to details that should give pause.

To many, it can feel so good to achieve a goal that they are unwilling to sacrifice the pleasure of satisfaction even when it is clearly a mistake. They will ignore indications that the outcome may not contribute to desired results.



Personalities and the Need for Closure

Researchers at the University of Maryland published a test in 1994 designed to measure a personality trait known as "the need for cognitive closure." People with a high degree of this trait have a strong desire for a confident judgment on an issue-- any confident judgment-- as compared to feeling confusion and ambiguity.

Most people have a mixed need for personal organization, decisiveness, and predictability. About 20 percent of people score high on this personality trait measure. While personal organization and self-discipline are seen as qualities of leadership, a rush to achieve completion on a goal can override common sense. SMART goals work well because they are specific, time-bound, and give structure toward end results. But for some, goal achievement itself can cause people to lose sight of the optimal outcomes.

How Did Goals Evolve?

SMART criteria are commonly attributed to Peter Drucker's management by objectives concept. The first-known use of the term occurs in the November 1981 issue of Management Review by George T. Doran. "There's a S.M.A.R.T. way to write management's goals and objectives."

A pair of university psychologists, Edwin Locke and Gary Latham, helped develop the SMART criteria through field experiments. Goal-setting theory was developed within organizational psychology over a 25-year period, based on some 400 laboratory and field studies.

These studies showed that specific, high (hard) goals led to a higher level of task performance than easy goals or vague/abstract goals, such as the exhortation to "do your best." So long as a person is committed to the goal, has the requisite ability to attain it, and does not have conflicting goals, there is a positive, linear relationship between goal difficulty and task performance.



When SMART Goals Get Stupid

The SMART system forces people to translate vague aspirations into concrete plans. Former GE CEO Jack Welch claims that his insistence on SMART goals was one of the reasons the company's stock more than tripled in eight years. Yet some divisions never seemed to excel and would have irregular results.

The problem is one of human nature: it is so satisfying to complete goals that people will write down trivial goals that are easily accomplished. People become obsessed with achievable but inconsequential goals, and focus on unimportant short-term objectives rather than more ambitious plans.

Leadership IQ, a training and research company, studied 4,182 employees from 397 companies and found that just 15 percent of those surveyed strongly agreed that their goals would help them achieve great things. Only 13 percent of workers strongly agreed that their goals would help them maximize their full potential.

The SMART Solution: Stretch Goals

How can you shake yourself out of a focus on short-term objectives? The answer is to innovate and grow by including stretch goals using SMART criteria. Simply focusing on SMART criteria won't help you live up to your highest potential.

Stretch goals use dreams and ambitions to set career targets. In order for this process to be productive, the goal has to be really big with no real idea of how to get it accomplished. If you do know how to get it done, then it's not really a stretch target.

Numerous studies have found that committing to ambitious, seemingly-out-of-reach targets can stimulate incredible results in innovation and productivity. A parallel concept called "big, hairy audacious goals," or BHAGS, is proposed by James Collins and Jerry Porras in their 1994 book entitled, Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies.

"A true BHAG is clear and compelling, serves as unifying focal point of effort, and acts as a clear catalyst for team spirit. It has a clear finish line, so the organization can know when it has achieved the goal; people like to shoot for finish lines." ~ Collins and Porras, *Built to Last*

Get smart about goals. Use the SMART criteria, but also maximize your potential by including stretch goals that push your competency and ability to new heights.

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