

Quality goals are SMART goals

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Have you ever had to deal with a manager blurting out goals that left you more puzzled than focused? Or have you tried to set a goal only to realize six months later you're still spinning in mud?

Although most managers agree with the importance of setting goals, many do not take the time to clearly develop goals with their people and write them down. As a result, people tend to get caught in the “activity trap,” where they become busy doing things, but not necessarily the right things. To focus on what is important, you should set SMART goals with your people. SMART is an acronym for the important factors in setting quality goals.

S - Specific and measurable. You don't say to somebody, “I want you to improve.” You have to be specific about the area that needs improvement and what good performance looks like. Being specific reinforces the old saying, “If you can't measure it, you can't manage it.” Therefore, goals have to be specific, observable, and measurable. If somebody says, “But my job can't be measured,” offer to eliminate it to see if anything will be missed.

M - Motivating. Not every job people are asked to do will be super exciting, but having motivating goals helps. Sometimes all people need to know is why the task is important. The “why”

explains how the person's task fits in overall job performance and the goals and objectives of the unit, division, organization, and customer or client. It clarifies how the task supports higher-level outcomes. People want to know that what they do makes a difference. That's motivating.

A - Attainable. It's a false assumption that to motivate people you have to set goals that are unattainable. What really motivates people is to have moderately difficult but achievable goals. This has been proven time and time again by setting up a version of the old ring toss game. People are asked to throw rings at a stake from any distance they choose. Unmotivated people, it has been found, stand either very close to the stake, where the goal is easily accomplished, or far away, where their chances for success are minimal. People who set goals that are too easy or too difficult don't want to be judged or held accountable. High achievers, based on the classic research on achievement motivation conducted by David McClelland, find the appropriate distance from the stake through experimentation. If they throw the rings from a certain spot and make most of the tosses, they move back. Why? It's too easy. If they miss most of their tosses, they move forward. Why? It's too difficult. McClelland found that high achievers like to set moderately difficult but attainable goals--that is, goals that stretch them but are not

impossible. That's what is meant by attainable.

R - Relevant. In previous columns, I've referenced the 80/20 rule. That is the fundamental belief that 80% of the performance you want from people comes from 20% of the activities they could get involved in. Therefore, a goal is relevant if it addresses one of the 20% activities that makes a difference in overall performance.

T - Trackable and time-bound. As a manager, you want to be able to either praise progress or redirect inappropriate behavior. To do that, you must be able to measure or count performance frequently, which means you need to put a record-keeping system in place to track performance. You need to set interim goals so that you can praise people's progress along the way or during day-to-day coaching. If a goal consists of completing a report by a specific date, the chances of receiving an acceptable, even outstanding, report will increase if interim reports are required. Good performance is a journey, not a destination. The goal is a destination. What managers have to do is manage the journey.

So apply the SMART concept when creating goals. Doing so will give you a much greater chance of accomplishing those goals in the manner and within the prescribed timeline you establish.

~ The End ~