

Setting goals & delegating using smarter SMART

Improving accountability and the likelihood of completion

The SMART framework or mnemonic for goal setting has been around for a very long time and there are a great many versions of what the letters stand for. Without question, setting goals or delegating in a structured manner helps goal achievement but we think that the framework needs some optimisation if you are going to derive the full value. We propose a version amended from the commonest representation that may yield greater accountability in those being asked to achieve SMART goals or undertake work delegated to them.

Understanding the SMART framework in overview

The origins of SMART are largely unknown but a system very similar to it was described by the management scholar Peter Drucker in his 1954 work entitled *The Practice of Management*. Since that early formalised description its use has become universal in the setting of goals and objectives.

Table 1 outlines the most commonly used terminology, against which we have added our own proposed amendments.

Letter	Common Representation	Proposed Representation
S	Specific	Specific
M	Measurable	Measurable
A	Achievable	Agreed
R	Realistic	Realistic
T	Time-bound	Time-bound
Plus		Why it is important and how success in it may be recognised

Table 1

MEASURABLE

An important component of the planning, implementation, review and subsequent planning revision process for achieving projects and goals is assessing progress towards the goal. Consequently, it is vital that stages or milestones, along with any performance indicators are built into the goal. Core to successful achievement is knowing where you are against your goal plan, so that you may ascertain whether you are ahead or behind plan and in the latter case whether you need to engage in different or extra activity to catch up.

ACHIEVABLE

Goals should be attainable (which is also used as the A representation) i.e. that you can create a reasonable plan to get there. However, what defines attainability? Two people could be perfectly capable of attaining a goal but one may believe they are not. Equally, one may formulate a plan that appears difficult to implement. On the flip side, setting goals that are easily attainable tends to reduce their motivation pull and close off the goal setter to greater possibilities. However, from our perspective there is too much overlap between attainable and realistic, which follows, suggesting to us that one or the other needs adapting.

REALISTIC

When Roger Bannister ran a mile in 3 minutes 59.4 seconds he achieved what nobody thought was possible or realistic. However, his record lasted just 6 weeks before being beaten by John Landy in Finland and so started a psychological landslide – it was possible to run a sub-4-minute mile. Within a couple of years 16 people had broken the same record. When you are setting goals, it is vital that the goal recipient believes they can complete the goal or this undermines the whole possibility. However, this is a delicate balance because we know that an easy to achieve goal lacks the motivational pull necessary to overcome inertia. The only true marker of realism is whether it has been achieved before and even that is debatable as Roger Bannister proves. We believe that an effective goal setter picks a goal outcome that is stretching but within grasp with the right plan and effort. Caution needs exercising around technical capability, timescales, resources, competing interests and confidence, balanced with helping the goal recipient see possible roads ahead on goals that are especially stretching.

Understanding the Components of SMART

SPECIFIC

Especially relevant when setting goals and objectives with individuals, the purpose of 'specific' is to ensure that the meaning of the goal is explicitly understood. Another way of looking at this is to ask yourself "if I gave this goal to 10 different people, how many meanings would I get back?" A good goal has comparatively little variation in meaning from one person to the next, despite different knowledge and skills, different personalities, different agendas or differing seniority. The skilled goal setter places a great deal of emphasis on providing a robust and sufficiently unambiguous description of the goal to ensure it gets achieved exactly as planned, nothing more, nothing less.





TIME-BOUND

If I decide to lose 10 kilos in weight it serves as an enticing goal that conforms to all elements of SMART with the exception of a hard stop in time. That time point is vital because without it I can be continually working towards my weight loss target without ever actually reaching it and yet when I hold the mirror up I can legitimately claim I am simply still on the road and haven't failed. A distinct time point focuses the mind not only on what has to happen but forces it to consider the timelines too. Goals with a time scale are far more likely to be achieved than those without. Furthermore, the timeframe is often necessary to coordinate goals in a bigger master plan. Distinct dates prove better than stated periods i.e. by 1st July 2009 is better than 'in one month', because one month on you can still be working towards your goal with one month still to do – the equivalent of not really having a timescale in the first place, whereas there is no flexibility in the hard and specific date.

Proposed amendments Smarter SMART

From ACHIEVABLE to AGREED

We believe that the meaning most people attach to ACHIEVABLE is broadly similar to that of realistic and yet SMART as a whole fails completely to deal with the accountability issue – to have a goal does not mean you will work towards it. We propose an amendment to AGREED because in reality there is so much that does need agreeing. When setting a goal with someone it is important to ascertain or agree the following:

- Do they understand the goal?
- What approach might they take?
- Do they believe they can achieve the goal?

- Are there any barriers to achievement and how can these be overcome?
- Do they have sufficient training or skills to achieve the goal?
- Will the proposed activity deliver the desired outcome?
- Is this the right goal in the bigger picture?
- What will the monitoring & feedback process look like?

It is only when this has been agreed with someone that they are likely to see themselves as genuinely accountable for the goal and therefore compelled to achieve it. Furthermore, by agreeing the above, you have checked understanding, broken down any issues with realism, created a monitoring framework that serves both parties and determined an outline way forward. This removes much of the uncertainty around goal attainment and represents a worthy amendment.

THE ADDITION OF PLUS

Realism is sometimes replaced with 'relevant' and we have some sympathy with the importance of someone believing the goal is rightfully theirs and important for what they do. However, dropping realism in preference to relevance is an unpalatable option because the importance of believing something is possible is well established. We prefer to approach this issue by adding a 'plus' element to SMART, naturally indicating that there is 'more'. This plus constituent consists of two distinct parts:

- Why the goal is important
- How success will be recognised

The first element delivers against relevance in that it ensures the recipient understands how the goal contributes to the bigger picture and fits into the scheme of everything else to be done. Furthermore, by demonstrating the absolute benefit achieved through the goal, motivation

is increased and the goal receives the appropriate focus and prioritisation. Essentially it ensures that the goal recipient is committed to the goal both by seeing the possibilities beyond the goal as well as understanding the consequences of not achieving it.

The second element involves asking a question around what evidence may be found when the goal is being achieved successfully. This is a useful concept because it not only clarifies the specific nature of the goal but also helps people identify what must be done for the goal to be achieved and provides a basis for performance management against the goal by highlighting suitable measures.

The final word

Are there any further amendments needed? In truth, we can find a further 17 representations of the letters without considering combinations. However most appear to be either derivatives of the established representations or require a fundamental departure from representations that have been shown to be vital in nature. We draw the conclusion that further amendments might result in a loss of usefulness and consequently should be resisted. The proposed singular amendment, coupled with an important addition, complete the framework's true purpose – enhancement of goal achievement. What is more difficult to fathom is that given the universal support for SMART, how can we embed this into practice?

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