10 Steps to Setting SMART Objectives

~ By George Ambler

Setting effective objectives to guide your team and organisation is very important for a leader to get right. Badly formulated objectives will steer an organisation in the wrong direction. I found this ten-step approach to setting SMART objectives from the National Primary and Care Trust:

1. Sort out the difference between objectives and aims, goals and/or targets before you start. Aims and goals relate to your aspirations, objectives are your battle-plan. Set as many objectives as you need for success.

2. SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely.

3. Don’t try to use that order M-A/R-S-T is often the best way to write objectives.

4. Measurable is the most important consideration. You will know that you’ve achieved your objective, because here is the evidence. I will know too! Make sure you state how you will record your success.

5. Achievable is linked to measurable. Usually, there’s no point in starting a job you know you can’t finish, or one where you can’t tell if or when you’ve finished it. How can I decide if it’s achievable?
   - You know it is measurable.
   - Others have done it successfully (before you, or somewhere else.)
   - It’s theoretically possible (i.e. clearly not ‘not achievable’.)
   - You have the necessary resources, or at least a realistic chance of getting them.
   - You’ve assessed the limitations.

6. If it’s achievable, it may not be realistic. If it isn’t realistic, it’s not achievable. You need to know:
   - Who’s going to do it?
   - Do they have (or can they get) the skills to do a good job?
   - Where’s the money coming from?
   - Who carries the can?

   Realistic is about human resources, time, money, opportunity.

7. The main reason it’s achievable, but not realistic is that it’s not a high priority. Often something else needs to be done first, before you’ll succeed. If so, set up two (or more) objectives in priority order.

8. The devil is in the specific detail. You will know your objective is specific enough if:
   - Everyone who’s involved knows that it includes them specifically.
• Everyone involved can understand it.
• Your objective is free from jargon.
• You’ve defined all your terms.
• You’ve used only appropriate language.

9. Timely means setting deadlines. You must include one, otherwise your objective isn’t measurable. But your deadlines must be realistic, or the task isn’t achievable. T must be M, and R, and S without these your objective can’t be top-priority.

10. It is worth this effort! You’ll know you’ve done your job well, and so will others.

George Ambler was born and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa. He has spend many hours reading and applying leadership practices in his life that has created significant personal growth and development.