

LEADERSHIP STRATEGY

Why 'SMART' Job Objectives Are Exactly That

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I write about management in its many forms.

Nov 2, 2016, 12:05pm EDT

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I was speaking recently with a friend who was relatively new to his job and was confused: He had two major project responsibilities with deadlines approaching, didn't have adequate time to complete both of them, and was uncertain about which one to focus on.

"Well, do your job objectives provide a clue?" I asked. "Which of the two projects is the higher priority?"

"I don't have any job objectives yet," he replied. "I know I'm supposed to get them, but my manager has been so busy he hasn't had time yet to work on them."

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Why was I not surprised? It was only about the 3,000th time I've encountered this situation. As usual, the management outcome was those all-too-familiar cousins: uncertainty, confusion and ineffectiveness.

Management by objectives. Establishing clear, meaningful job objectives is one of the most fundamental management tasks, but one of the most frequently ignored. Without well-conceived objectives, how do employees know how to best prioritize their time? And even more important from a management standpoint, how can employees be held thoughtfully accountable?

The concept of "management by objectives" goes back, as does so much in management, to [Peter Drucker](#), and his classic 1954 book, *The Practice of Management*. It wasn't until 1981, however, that the notion of "SMART" objectives was developed, it's generally believed, with an article in *Management Review* by George Doran, a director of Corporate Planning for a Washington-based power company.

I was introduced to SMART objectives when I first went into management in 1988. While I completely admit there are many ways to skin this cat - many ways to approach developing productive objectives for your employees - if you're not exactly sure how to go about it, you won't go wrong with SMART objectives as a solid starting point.

So what does the acronym stand for? Many variations have evolved over the years (based on different organizations' needs), but the original breakdown is:

Specific

Measurable

Assignable

Realistic

Time-related

Other common variations? During my career I've seen "Strategic" used in place of "Specific," "Meaningful" in place of "Measurable," "Achievable" in place of "Assignable," and "Relevant" in place of "Realistic."

I've also personally liked to use "Agreed-Upon" (since a key element of effective objective-setting is having employees buy into the goals they're working toward). And I like "Ambitious but Attainable" (OK, I know this one has too many words in it, but I do like the sentiment).

At the end of the day it doesn't really matter all that much which words you use - the far more important thing is that you as a manager have *something*. Have some clear objectives for your employees... that are relevant to the needs of your organization.

If you don't have them, I can pretty much guarantee one thing: Down the road, as time goes on, it will be a recipe (as we saw with the example at the outset) for confusion and likely employee-manager conflict.

Management by objectives makes the whole endeavor less emotional and more rational. Mr. Drucker, as is so often the case, got it right many years ago.

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