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How to Create SMART Goals

Aug 23, 2018 | By [Peter Landau](#) in [Project Management](#)

SMART is a mnemonic acronym that establishes criteria for ideal goals and objectives in a project. Goals and objectives should always be “SMART,” which stands for **Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Related**. This set of criteria helps managers both recognize their goals and create a structural guide to achieve them.

SMART first appeared in a 1981 issue of the magazine *Management Review*, in a paper by Gorge T. Doran titled, “There’s a SMART Way to Write Management’s Goals and Objectives.” The paper discussed objectives and how difficult, yet critical, it is to set them. He created SMART to help guide managers in their objective setting process.

Within that simple set of criteria is a guide to help teams be more productive, while always keeping goals in mind. Without goals there is no focus, and without focus the chance of successfully completing a project is slim.



What Does SMART Mean?

The acronym is easy to remember. As mentioned, SMART stands for specific, measurable, assignable, realistic and time-related. But what does that really mean?

Specific

Begin by defining what it is that you're trying to achieve. Be specific. Ask the Five W's: who, what, why, where and which. For example:

- Who is going to be involved in achieving this goal?
- What [project management tools](#) will they need to accomplish it?
- Why is the goal important?
- Where will the work be located?
- Which resources are going to be needed to do it?

Basically, the more you can focus in on the specifics, the more achievable the goal.

Measurable

In order for a goal to be SMART, it must be measurable, and in order to track your progress towards your goal, you have to know how to measure it. That keeps you on track and motivates you to finish on time. So, in order to be successful, you need to regularly monitor and assess your progress.

Also, you have to know how to tell when you've reached that goal, so as not to waste time once it's already been achieved. Basically, you must set up [metrics to measure your progress](#). Project milestones can help break up a timeline if a project extends over some months.

Achievable

There's no point having and measuring a goal that's impossible to achieve. Therefore, another criterion for a SMART goal is discerning if the goal you've defined is realistic. You want to reach beyond what you think is possible (because nothing is achieved by playing it safe), but not so far that the project comes crashing down on top of you.

You must [know your resources well](#), and ask if this goal can be accomplished considering the constraints under which you're working, which include scheduling and costs.

Relevant

The goal is now defined, measurable and achievable, but is it relevant? A SMART goal has to be relevant, and that doesn't mean just to you but to the organization writ large.

That means your goal, even after meeting all the prior criteria, must now align with other relevant goals because success requires the support and assistance from everyone on the project team. Therefore, it must work in congress with other parts of the project and the overall strategy of the organization.

This creates a whole new set of questions such as, is the goal worthwhile? Maybe the time isn't right. Does it match other needs? Maybe you're not the right person to lead this initiative, or maybe it's not aligned with current economics or social trends. If it offers the right answers to these questions, then it's relevant.

Time-Related

A SMART goal will always be time-related because goals often cannot be achieved without a deadline. A deadline serves as a great motivator and can provide context for you to recognize the various tasks necessary to reach that goal in the time allotted. Therefore, giving the goal time constraints helps keep you on track.

Naturally, you must answer questions, such as: when must the goal be achieved? Then get more specific, is that in six months, six weeks, six days? Without a time frame you can't devise a plan, and the goal will never be realized.

Creating SMART Goals

Now that SMART is clearly defined, how do you create SMART goals? Well, it should be obvious now that the process starts with asking a lot of questions. Pose questions to yourself, your team and even stakeholders. The answers to these questions will whittle down your options and sharpen your strategy. From there, goals will become clear and attainable.

Be Positive and Optimistic

While being realistic is part of the process, it's important not to let a cynical attitude curb your efforts. Be positive. What do you want to achieve? Think big; you can always pull back if necessary. On the contrary, it's difficult to expand on a conservative idea.

The great thing about using SMART as a method to define your project goals is that it's not a tedious exercise. It can be fun, and it is always going to leave you with greater insights into your goals.

SMART Can Apply to Any Goal

Whatever the goal, run it through SMART to discover if it's worth the time and effort. First, be specific: what is the project and what product, service or problem is it addressing?

Then, how can you measure the progress of that project? What is it you want to achieve and by what date? Then working backwards, you can set up a task list and a metric to see if you're following that schedule. Basically, you're building a [project dashboard](#) to measure the various aspects of the project against a baseline you have created in the planning stage.

In terms of whether or not it can be achieved, make sure that the organization is on board with the project. The project will have to align with the company's overall strategy. But is it also relevant? Will the project in fact solve a problem or produce a useful product or service?

Finally, what's the time constraint? How long do you have to complete the project and still be able to take advantage of the opportunity that the project was created to exploit?

All this information will combine to help you define and reach SMART goals. But the SMART criteria is not chiseled in stone. It can be flexible and is open to revision as needed. So, monitor and evaluate key metrics as your project progresses to make sure that the goal you set is in fact smart!