

## Setting Clear Objectives

By BNET Editorial

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When you set a clear objective, you or your direct reports are able to focus attention and energy on a concrete aspiration—anything from a small task to a career ambition. In fact, it's not really important how small or large the objective is, so long as the decisions you make and the activities you undertake all support the achievement of your chosen goal.

When you set an objective, you send an image to your subconscious mind. It remains there until the objective becomes reality. The good thing about the subconscious mind is that it doesn't work logically; it doesn't matter if the objective "makes sense" or not. What matters is that you hold onto that image until your subconscious mind has succeeded in bringing it to fruition. This is how all creative people work, from inventors to artists, from architects to interior designers, from landscape gardeners to great chefs. They all bring concrete form to the images they seed in their subconscious minds.

This principle works for aspirations of all sizes, so you can be bold and set ambitious objectives.

### What You Need to Know

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**I have set some clear objectives for members of my project team, and they don't seem to be reaching them. They have all the resources they need. What's going wrong?**

You may have set the objectives according to the needs of the project and forgotten that your team members need to be motivated and committed if they are going to meet them. Have you asked them how they would like to contribute to the project and which objectives they would like to take responsibility for? You may find that you have allocated the objectives to the "wrong" people and that their interests and skills are not aligned with your thinking.

**I know what objectives I need to set for my team in order to support the organizational intention. However, I am not being given timelines. How can I motivate my team if I can't pin this down?**

Sometimes the information you need to set objectives is not available to you. However, it is still important that you pin down all the variables of an objective. You may need to anticipate the amount of time you are likely to have or create a timeline of your own that will show your team in a good light. This means asking yourself what the minimum amount of time is that is available to you. If you

find yourself ahead of the game, think of a way to reward your team for coming in early so that they remain motivated.

### **I am setting objectives for my direct reports and they are reaching them frequently, but they don't seem to be energized by them. What can I do differently?**

You may not be giving them sufficiently challenging or stretching objectives. If they are meeting your expectations too easily, they are likely to become bored and demotivated. Try asking them for their ideas about what they would like to achieve. You may be surprised at their level of inventiveness and aspiration.

### **I find it hard to set objectives for myself because I don't know what I want to achieve in the future. How can I go about clarifying this?**

It sounds as if you have not really found what motivates and inspires you in your current occupation. Think about what you have done in the past that has really excited you and ask yourself if you can fold some elements of this into your personal objectives. Even if you find that it is not what you really want to do, you will at least have focused your energy and discovered something about yourself. And this is one less avenue to go down on your quest to find out what you really want to achieve.

## **What to Do**

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Management by Objectives, or MBO as it is more commonly known, was an approach to management conceived by Peter Drucker in the mid-1950's to increase productivity and organizational effectiveness. It has largely disappeared in management circles, due in part to the incentive to short-circuit "good practice" in order to achieve the objective. However, the objective setting part has endured and has reemerged as an important way of focusing attention on what needs to be done.

Objective setting is an important part of project management, in that it takes MBO a step further by incorporating and placing equal emphasis on the processes that lead to the achievement of an objective. It also caters to unexpected changes in the context or circumstances of the plan, the impact of new information, and human nature; this being the level of intention to reach the objective, which may vary from disinterest in an imposed objective to passion for a chosen objective.

Because you need a goal or objective in order to achieve something, the notion of SMART objectives has survived MBO. SMART objectives are Specific, Measurable, Achievable (or Actionable), Realistic

(Reasonable, Relevant or Result-Oriented) and Time-Specific. Over the years, the acronym has acquired new words but it still aims to create order and process around objectives.

When you set an objective, or help someone to set an objective, it may help to follow the SMART structure in sequence.

## **Be Specific about Your Objective**

When you set an objective, it is important to be as clear as possible about what the outcome will look like. The question “How do you know when you are there?” is a good one to ask at this stage. “What does it look like?” “What does it feel like?” “How does it sound?” “Is it mobile or static?” See if you can describe the objective in great detail. The more specific you can be at this stage, the more likely you are to reach this objective precisely. Try to focus on the ultimate form of the desired outcome at this stage. To hold one image is much better than myriad images, which only serve to confuse the brain!

## **Be Sure Your Objective is Measurable**

If your objective is not tangible, as many are not, you will not know that you have succeeded unless you attach a measure to it. This may be a financial measure, a percentage or proportional measure, or a subjective measure, perhaps drawn from a satisfaction survey. As long as you specify the measure at the outset, you will know when you have achieved it.

Remember that if you set the measure incorrectly, and it is not directly correlated with your objective, you may find yourself measuring the wrong thing. If you want to get a sense of customer satisfaction for instance, and you chose the percentage increase in sales as the measure, you could find yourself thinking that you had achieved your objective when, in fact, there was a run on your product because your competitor ran out of stock!

## **Be Sure Your Objective is Achievable**

Ensuring that an objective is achievable is important to reassure the person who is aiming to reach it that it is possible. However, the objective should not be too easy. Setting stretch targets helps to boost quality, performance, productivity, and success. Do not be too diffident when setting objectives. Add a bit of challenge to energize the people who is responsible for reaching them.

“Aspirational” objectives may have their place in career or personal development plans, but the chances that a project manager’s aspirational objectives will motivate those to whom they are allocated are probably quite small. For this reason, they need to be practical, factual, and tangible.

## **Be Sure Your Objective is Realistic**

It is no good misrepresenting the objective if it is already seen as impossible. It must be credible in order to motivate someone to reach it. Being realistic about the environment in which the objective has been set is helpful, because it compels you to look at the obstacles that may sabotage your ability to reach it. Once you have properly appraised the situation, you can start thinking of ways around these obstacles. If you pretend they do not exist, you will be in for a disappointment.

## **Be Sure Your Objective is Time-Specific**

Setting a timeline enables you to create a process rhythm. Knowing when to put in additional effort and knowing when you can rest awhile is important. If you have no deadline, the chances are that some competing priority will emerge, which will draw your attention from reaching your objective. Also, you may be responsible for an objective that is critical for another part of the process or plan. Any delay in your achievement could undermine the achievement of the overall goal.

If you use the SMART approach, it should be stressed that, unless you attach personal motivation to the objective, the chances are it will not be met. Most people like to work in areas that have meaning for them. They are often prepared to trade a less favorable objective for reward on a different level, but the reward needs to be in place in order for them to take wholehearted responsibility for the objective.

## **What to Avoid**

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### **You Fail to Stay Focused on the Objective**

People often get bogged down in the variables and contingencies when setting objectives. Try to keep your sights on what you ultimately wish to achieve. This means rendering the variables and contingencies to a different part of your objective-setting activity. They may come in at the “Realistic” stage when you identify what may get in your way.

### **You Allow the Process to Become Routine**

In operational environments, objectives are set and reached all the time and may become routine and unexciting. If this is happening, try creating an overarching objective which everyone can work

toward. This can add a bit of spice to what otherwise might be experienced as a repetitive and monochrome environment.

## **You Fail to Tailor the Approach**

Some people see the world in a concrete and material form while others use more abstract and visual ways of interpreting the world. When you are setting objectives, see if you can dovetail the nature of the objective with the style and approach of the person or people who are destined to achieve it. You could do this by asking them to articulate the way they see the objective and noticing the language they use, which you can then reflect back to them. This will ensure that the objective is owned by them, and by articulating it themselves, they will necessarily take responsibility for achieving it.

## **You Fail to Give Meaning to People's Efforts**

Objectives are sometimes set in a vacuum with apparently no rationale behind them. "Just do it!" is not an approach that breeds enthusiasm. Remember that people like to attach meaning to what they do, and if they do not feel as they are contributing to something valuable, they may not be motivated to do it, however essential it is. Even if you are under pressure, try to take time to place the objective in a wider context so that people know their efforts go toward something that they can believe in.

## **Where to Learn More**

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### **Books:**

Anderson, Erling S., and Kristoffer V. Grud, and Tor Haug, and Mike Katagiri, Goal Directed Project Management: Effective Techniques and Strategies. Kogan Page, 2004.

Forman, Ernest H., and Mary Anne Selly, Decision by Objectives: How to Convince Others That You Are Right. World Scientific Publishing, 2001.

Drucker, Peter, The Practice of Management. HarperBusiness, 2006.

### **Web Sites:**

Job Search Manual: [www.jobsearchmanual.com/others/Setting\\_Clear\\_Objectives.html](http://www.jobsearchmanual.com/others/Setting_Clear_Objectives.html)

The Practice of Leadership: [www.thepracticeofleadership.net/2006/03/11/setting-smart-objectives](http://www.thepracticeofleadership.net/2006/03/11/setting-smart-objectives)

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