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SMART Goals: Bad Idea

Dump the SMART acronym. Insist that people set wise goals that truly test the limits of their capabilities.

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If a company provides managers with performance appraisal training, in almost every case there will be a unit explaining SMART goals. By now, almost everyone who works for an organization is familiar with the hackneyed SMART acronym for setting goals: Goals must be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound. There are many variations of the words on which the acronym is based, but they are all essentially the same. But teaching SMART goals isn't smart. It's a bad idea that needs to be stomped out.

What's wrong with SMART goals? First, in a great many organizations the discussion of goal-setting never goes any further than telling managers to set goals and make sure they meet the SMART test. But managers aren't told where they should look for goals, or how to determine whether their goals are appropriate and genuinely important, or how to make sure there's some congruity between the goals individuals set and the business strategy of the department or the organization as a whole.

SMART Goals and Spell-Checkers

Another problem: While the SMART test may be a useful mechanism for making sure a goal statement has been phrased correctly (in the same way a spell-checker is a useful mechanism by flagging any misspelled words in a document), it doesn't help at all in determining whether the goal itself is a good idea. In other words, a goal can be SMART without being wise. All a spell-checker can do is tell you whether what you've written has any misspelled words. It can't help you determine whether what you've written is any good; it can't distinguish between the *Declaration of Independence* and *Mein Kampf*.

For example, consider the goal statement announced by President John Kennedy on May 25, 1961:

"I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon, and returning him safely to the earth."

How does Kennedy's goal statement stack up against the SMART test? Remarkably well. It's certainly specific and time-bound, and it's easily measurable. Realistic and attainable? While there are still a few cranks who contend that the first moon landing really was filmed on a Warner Brothers back lot, almost everyone acknowledges that on July 21, 1969, Neil Armstrong became the first man to set foot on the moon, stepping onto the moon's surface in the Sea of Tranquility at 0256 GMT.

Kennedy's goal clearly was SMART. But was it wise?

The man-on-the-moon program provided great benefits: a huge psychological boost in the race for space with the Russians, the creation of lots of jobs, an increased focus on science and technology, a couple of moon rocks, and the development of Velcro fasteners and Tang powdered orange juice substitute. But it also cost a huge amount—the best estimate is about \$170 billion. For that amount of money we could have built several universities the size of the University of Illinois, or provided a

1,200-square-foot house for every American family living under the poverty line. Would these have been better investments than shoveling \$170 billion into a rocket ship and blasting it into outer space?

Nobody knows, because the question wasn't asked. Once the goal had been set by the president and enthusiastically taken up by Congress in the optimistic early 1960s, nobody bothered to question whether there were better ways of spending this colossal amount of money. Landing a man on the moon was SMART. Nobody asked whether it was wise.

The best use for the SMART test is exactly that—as a test of somewhat minor importance to make sure an individual's final goal statements are appropriately stated. But SMART can't tell you whether a goal should actually be set.

SMART Goals = Low Goals

The biggest problem with using the SMART test as the criterion for whether goals are properly set is that it encourages the setting of low goals. Requiring that goals be *Specific* and *Measurable* results in reduced effort and premature satisfaction. A SMART-goal advocate probably would have nothing but applause for a salesman's goal of "increase sales in the Eastern territory by 3 percent in the first quarter." But while that goal is certainly stated in a specific and measurable way, it may well be that the Eastern division's potential for increased sales is on the order of 20 percent. But once the salesman has hit his SMART goal target of a 3 percent increase, he's likely to back off and consider the job finished. The SMART test doesn't provide the salesman any help in realizing he's actually set the goal far below what actually might be achieved.

A much better goal might be "Maximize the sales potential of the Eastern division." While that revised goal statement flunks the SMART test, it's likely to result in greater effort and accomplishment—and higher sales—than would result from merely setting a specific and measurable target.

No one is going to set goals that are not *Attainable* or *Realistic*, but setting goals that are sure to be achieved violates one of the main research findings regarding goal setting. A few years ago, Professors Edwin A. Locke and Gary P. Latham, the two most-recognized academic researchers on goal-setting, wrote an article for the journal, *American Psychologist*, that summarized their 35 years of research on goal-setting. What did they find? Most important, they found that high goals generate greater effort than low goals, and the highest or most difficult goals produced the greatest levels of effort and performance.

If they abide by the SMART test's ill-advised counsel, every individual will stay contentedly within his comfort zone and only set goals that are sure winners.

The best course of action? Dump the SMART acronym. Insist that people set wise goals that truly test the limits of their capabilities.

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