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How to Set Truly SMART Goals

(Note: It's Not What You're Thinking)

by Liz Bywater

I know what you may be thinking. SMART goals? What's the big deal about SMART goals? I mean, they aren't exactly front-page news. You've heard about SMART goals, written SMART goals, and advised others on the utility of setting SMART goals. Great. You're off to a good start.

After all, the SMART approach to goal setting makes sense. When your goals are **Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-Based**, you've got a good foundation for performance improvement. For example *'I will improve my team's effectiveness'* is a reasonable but fairly vague intention. Using the traditional SMART approach, you can create something far more actionable: *'I will increase my team's productivity by 20 percent by conducting focused team meetings from 10 to 11:00 every Wednesday, delegating meaningful tasks to team members and requiring weekly progress reports on high priority items.'*

You get the idea. The traditional SMART technique is indeed a useful tool. It is not, however, sufficient. If you're looking to develop goals that are highly meaningful, relevant and motivating—and you should be—you'll need to take SMART to a whole new level. To do so, start using SMART in a different way and you'll be able to set goals that are based on **Strengths, Motivation, Accountability, Relevance and Tenacity**.

Here's a closer look:

Strengths. Contrary to long-standing popular opinion, our goals should not be centered on correcting for flaws, deficits, weaknesses or shortcomings. A growing body of research (such as that conducted by the Gallup organization) shows us that trying to correct for weaknesses is essentially a waste of precious time and energy. Instead, we ought to be focusing on our areas of strength. Build upon your natural talents and existing strengths and watch your performance soar to new heights.

A quick example: I've had the pleasure of coaching a successful executive in the biotechnology field. He happens to be a fabulously creative and innovative individual. He consistently develops profitable new product ideas for his company. His weakness, however, lies in his interpersonal skills. He's an introvert by nature and not always comfortable interacting with co-workers. Of course, he could set a performance goal of developing his social skills and becoming more engaging with others. How successful, however, will this person be in changing the proverbial stripes of his personality? Wouldn't his time be better spent in further developing his creativity and building upon his existing talent for innovation? Meaningful performance improvement lies in identifying and building upon the strengths you already possess.

Motivation. Make no mistake, changing behavior is incredibly difficult work. And isn't that what we're talking about here? Goals are all about changing our behavior—doing more of this, doing less of that, taking a different approach. To take on the demands and challenges of changing our behavior, we've got to tap into some significant motivation. We've got to ask the question: *What's in it for me?*

For example, let's say one of your goals is to have dinner at home with your family at least three nights a week, instead of staying at the office until your typical 7 PM. To make this happen, you'll have to be much more efficient with your time. You'll need to become better organized. You'll have to prioritize more diligently and delegate wherever you can. It's not going to be easy and you'll probably run into some resistance.

But you'll have the motivation you need to counter these challenges if you've identified what's in it for you. A warm dinner at home with family, conversing with your kids about their days at school, freeing up evening time for some leisurely reading or a quick workout on

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the treadmill. That's just the motivation you'll need to take on the challenges of tightening up your work day.

Accountability. Because behavior is so difficult to change, we often fail to live up to our own goals and expectations. To improve your chances of success, it can be enormously helpful to engage another person in the process—someone who will hold you accountable to your stated intentions and, in essence, keep you honest. This person knows what you're trying to achieve and will not look the other way when you slip back into unproductive patterns of behavior. He will also back you up and congratulate you as you progress toward the achievement of your goals. You can think of this person as your accountability partner or your 'SMART partner'. Smart goals, smart partner.

Who might make a good SMART partner? It can be a coworker, a friend, a spouse or a boss. In fact, bringing your manager into the process is one of the most effective ways of building accountability into the change process. You can—and should—incorporate your SMART goals into your official performance review. This will help ensure that you create meaningful, relevant goals—ones that you'll truly strive to accomplish—in the year ahead.

Relevance. Finding the relevance in a particular goal requires asking yourself the following questions: *What's the point? Why am I setting this goal? Does it have significance in my life? Is it important to my career? To me personally or to my family?*

A personal example: When I was in graduate school, I decided to learn Spanish. Just for the fun of it, really. It was relevant at the time because I wanted to do something totally different from what I was doing in graduate school. My choice of diversion could just as easily have been ballroom dancing, Indian cooking or photography lessons.

After awhile, however, Spanish lessons no longer held any real significance in my life. I became involved other activities. And since I didn't plan to work in Spain or Latin America, there was no 'real-world' application to my

Spanish studies. The relevance was gone. I stopped taking classes.

When creating your own goals, make sure they're truly relevant to your home life and/or career. You can also be proactive and set goals that help are relevant to the next level of work responsibility. This is a smart approach to developing yourself—in real time—for future opportunities.

Tenacity. As should be clear at this point, established patterns of behavior are very resistant to change. Old habits are hard to break. We are so used to doing things a certain way that our habits have become hard-wired and automatic.

Case in point: Have you ever driven to work and gotten there without really trying? You know, you get into your car, turn on your favorite music or audio book and before you know it, you're pulling into the company parking lot. This is what happens with habitual patterns of behavior. You're not conscious of your actions but your brain and body know just what to do – and they do it.

The challenge lies in altering those well-established patterns of behavior. To do so takes a whole lot of deliberate effort, time and plenty of persistence. Your tenacity will be rewarded, however, in meaningful and sustainable performance improvement. Here's where the adage 'If at first you don't succeed...' truly applies.

And that's all there is to it. Try this new approach to SMART goal setting and see for yourself just how meaningful and motivating your goals can be. Then get out there and make things happen. Armed with the SMART approach, you're well on your way to your greatest achievements yet. □

