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# CAREER DEVELOPMENT

## Setting “Objective” Objectives

By Mitchell Stephenson

It's that time of year when we all sit down and draft our performance objectives and development plans for the upcoming year. For many of us, we import or paste a copy of the prior year's objectives into this year's template. Or, for those starting a new job, we may ask our new managers to provide objectives, or base them on the broader team goals. This will get us through the formal objective-setting process, but it won't inspire us to strive to be better than we were the year before.

When setting yearly objectives, here are some ideas to help move you toward where you want to go in your job or career, whether it's developing your strengths, getting a promotion or even working toward a new position.

### GET CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK ON YOUR STRENGTHS AND DEVELOPMENT AREAS

Don't rely strictly on your self-assessment. Have a meaningful year-end discussion with your manager, and make note of development areas. Focus on the areas in which you both agree. Get feedback from peers, other managers whom you respect and your staff. The more you ask, the more you will learn about yourself and how others see you. Seek honest feedback, as it can help you frame your own understanding of what you should work on to improve in the upcoming year, and can also help you prioritize which items to begin with.

### SET SMART OBJECTIVES

The SMART acronym stands for the following phrases:

- **Specific.** Be as specific as possible when writing objectives. Add details and make them clear. For example, “complete system conversion” is not specific and will be difficult to evaluate objectively. Instead, write “complete business requirement, implementation of code, testing and release of new system by 10/1,” which includes some very specific deliverables you must achieve during the year.
- **Measurable.** Performance goals should be easily measured. “Support ad hoc requests” cannot be measured. Instead, an



objective like “for every ad hoc request received, determine feasibility, establish requirements and complete within original timeline” gives you something to objectively measure as to whether you achieved it for each request.

- **Action-oriented/achievable.** Objectives should be things you need or want to accomplish. Don't write “increase sales by 10 percent next year” unless you are directly responsible for selling business. Those kinds of goals may be true for the company, but your own objectives need to reflect what action you need to take to support them. Instead, write “provide pricing support for all client requests within established time frame,” which is an action you need to take in your role to support the company objective.
- **Realistic.** Objectives should be realistic and can also be stretch goals; however, it is important not to set yourself up for failure. Don't set an objective like “complete all benefit calculations on time” if you know from historical data that you can only complete 85 percent on time. Instead, write “complete 85 percent of benefit calculations by original client deliverable,” which is achievable.

- **Time-sensitive.** Objectives should be items you can accomplish within a specified time. Don't write "obtain associateship in the Society of Actuaries" as an objective. Include a time frame as follows: "Complete all requirements for associateship in the Society of Actuaries by 7/1; attend Associateship Professionalism Course by 10/1."

Writing SMART objectives is especially important for development plans. Many plans are written with goals such as "improve communication skills." This is not specific enough to inspire action or measurable enough to show you've improved on the skill throughout the year. Instead try: "Deliver three presentations of 15 minutes in length or more to a group of at least five people at least three times this year." It may challenge some of us to think about doing this, but it will surely help us to work on our communication skills!

#### INCLUDE SOME STRETCH GOALS

Your objectives should be realistic and achievable. You need to include stretch goals, however, to push yourself to be better than you were the year before. Set stretch goals knowing that if you work hard, focus and improve throughout the year, you can strive toward success. At the end of the year, you can realistically evaluate how hard you pushed yourself and how much

you improved throughout the year, based on how close you came to your stretch objectives.

#### TALK ABOUT YOUR OBJECTIVES AND DEVELOPMENT PLAN WITH YOUR MANAGER

Make sure your manager agrees with your strategy. Without your manager's buy-in, you may not be working toward the goals that are most important to the team, the division and the organization. Your manager can also recommend additional developmental items. You won't know this if you don't discuss and seek approval from your manager for your objectives and development plan.

Keep these tips in mind as you go through the exercise of setting objectives and development plans. With the right attention and focus on this effort, you can have a plan that not only helps you measure your progress throughout the year, but will also help you take the next steps in your career. ■



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