



Formulate objectives that effectively spur people into action

The challenge

Managers know that objectives are necessary to guide their teams and stimulate them to action. However, formulating effective objectives is not as easy as it may seem at first glance. People are all too frequently discouraged by objectives they feel are unrealistic or often respond to their objectives in a way that is not in line with the manager's expectations. Moreover, poorly expressed objectives can produce conflict and resistance by leading to situations in which subordinates are convinced that they have done what was expected of them, only to find that the boss is disappointed with their performance!

Define "SMART" objectives

SMART is an acronym that will help you memorize the five key characteristics of an effective objective:

S	Stretch An objective is all the more motivating when the subordinate feels satisfied and proud to attain it.	- Propose a challenge that requires a certain amount of effort. - Explain to the subordinate what he or she will gain from achieving it.	Example "Now that you understand the technique, you can take charge of managing the project. This will prepare you for a managerial role."
M	Measurable What defines success must be as clear as possible. In addition, measurable objectives enable to track progress and take corrective actions if needed.	- If possible, define quantified indicators. - When this is not possible, specify "deliverables". - Establish the means to measure progress.	Examples "Answer 95% of customer requests within 48 hours," if the system can track this information. "Develop a chart to track various ongoing projects, and update this chart weekly."
A	Action-Oriented The subordinate must clearly understand what is expected of him or her in order to facilitate action as well as performance assessment.	- Concretely describe expected initiatives, behaviors or results. - Avoid vague and ambiguous terms. - Also specify what is not expected.	Examples "Answer calls before the 3rd ring" rather than "Improve phone call reception." "Reduce time to market for new products by five months" rather than "Accelerate innovation."
R	Realistic An objective that seems unattainable can be demoralizing to a subordinate who feels that failure is the only possible outcome.	- Take account of available resources, the subordinate's skills and the context. - Try to gain the adhesion of the subordinate. - Define objectives that the subordinate truly has power to influence.	Examples "Ensure that the IT system is operational 99% of the time" rather than 100%. "Increase sales to existing accounts by x%" rather than "Increase customer satisfaction" for salespeople who have no influence over product quality.
T	Timely A deadline is very stimulating. Establishing a calendar also makes tracking progress easier.	- Set a deadline by which the objective must be attained. - Define milestones and intermediary objectives if the deadline is far in the future.	Examples "Cut the defect rate in half by the end of the year." "Develop specifications for March 30, a preliminary project by May 15 and a test version by June 1."