

PDR GUIDE—GOAL CHARACTERISTICS

Effective performance goals, objectives or indicators have these SMART features (Rudman 1997, p. 291): specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-framed.

- **Specific** Goals should be specific rather than vague. They should also deal with outcomes rather than inputs. Specific goals are unambiguous and behavioural. Specific goals reduce misunderstanding about what behaviours are to be achieved. Admonitions such as 'be dependable', 'work hard', 'take initiative' or 'do your best' are too general and too difficult to measure and are therefore of limited motivational value.
- **Measurable** So that the nature and extent of the achievement can be assessed, goals should incorporate an agreed measure or standard. These may be quantitative, as in 'increase research papers by 40 per cent', or qualitative, using a standard or statement agreed by the manager and staff member. Often, qualitative goals can be expressed in quantitative terms, as in 'improve customer satisfaction so that complaints do not exceed one per week on average'. There is no job in which the desired performance or results cannot be measured in some way.
- **Agreed** Getting the job holder's commitment is a key to setting effective targets. Staff members should participate fully in the setting of the objectives for their own jobs, and have an appropriate opportunity to contribute to planning the objectives of the workgroup, the department and the organisation as a whole. Each person's objectives should fit in with those of the wider workgroup or workplace. At the very least, managers should ensure that the person responsible for achieving a particular objective understands and accepts it.
- **Realistic** Goals should be challenging, but not beyond the reach of the staff member. If accepted, difficult goals lead to better performance than easy goals (Wood, Mento & Locke 1987). Simply stated, hard goals are more motivating than easy goals. But staff will simply not accept goals which they perceive to be unreasonable or unreachable. In addition, they get no sense of achievement from pursuing goals they can never reach. Similarly, objectives that are set too low will not challenge people's capabilities and will have no motivating effect.

Goals are also realistic if they are consistent with the organisation's plans and objectives, are within the scope of the individual's responsibilities, and are within the individual's skills and abilities. Goals that are inconsistent in the sense that they are logically impossible to accomplish simultaneously, or incompatible in the sense that they both require so much effort that they can't be accomplished at the same time, create frustration and alienation. When employees complain that goals are incompatible or inconsistent, managers should be flexible enough to reconsider their expectations.

- **Time-framed** Just as goals should be specific rather than vague, they should also have a time frame or time limit: thus, 'increase research output by 10 per cent by the end of this year'. If a number of goals are being set, it is important that their time spans or completion dates are staggered through the period. Similarly, people will feel unduly pressured if all their goals fall due at the same time. Target dates must be realistic: we frequently underestimate how long it will take to complete certain activities, especially if the individual has a number of objectives to be achieved within a particular period of time.

EXAMPLES OF SMART GOALS

Some examples of goals with SMART features are:

- Publish 5 papers per year in refereed journals
- Reduce turnaround for marking student papers to 5 working days in 80% of cases by the end of Semester 1, 2006
- Reduce the time to handle a student enquiry regarding [topic] from x hours/days to y hours/days in all cases by Semester 2, 2006
- Decrease the number of errors relating to student enrolments by 20% by beginning of Semester 1, 2006

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