



## Smarter than SMART

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*A version of this article will appear in Assessment & Development Matters, Volume 1, No.4, Winter 2009, published by the British Psychological Society.*

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Vague, ambiguous objectives cause people to do the wrong thing. "Wrong" as perceived by the manager who thought he/she had agreed clear objectives. As a result, effort and resources are misdirected. And, months later, attempts to review performance reveal different interpretations of the objectives. Appraisal then becomes equally vague and/or contentious. A core business process, performance management, has been undermined. Unsurprisingly, the current research suggests widespread difficulties and dissatisfaction with performance review (Goodge and Coomber, 2009)

Hence, the concept of SMART objectives. It's not a bad idea; it has been around for at least 30 years. But, somehow it does not work today; very few managers actually set SMART objectives. Sure, managers can write SMART objectives on training courses, but real-life objectives are typically just a few words, most objectives are just headlines.

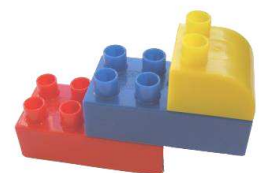
Our (HR's) answer has often been more performance review training and more guidance for managers. But, judging by the repeated efforts to train managers, and the countless new versions of appraisal paperwork, the answer doesn't work. And, it is also a little disingenuous of us when many of our objectives in HR are not SMART either!

Let's look at things differently. Maybe the absence of SMART objectives is not managers' fault at all! In today's flexible, ever-changing organisations SMART might not be achievable or even desirable. There might be a few reasons for that...

- Writing specific objectives means making assumptions about the future, assumptions which turn out to be wrong before too long.
- In a few weeks the agreed measures of performance might change, or new measures become more important.
- Things are changing so quickly what's achievable today won't be achievable tomorrow.

You can see where this is going... SMART objectives don't seem to fit today's unstable world. Perhaps that's why many managers don't, or can't, set SMART objectives?

So what will work in today's organisations? What would be smarter than SMART? Here's an alternative approach in four easy steps. It is known as Agree, and it is part of the new thinking on performance explained later.





## agree

- Step 1. Write an objective in a few words or a phrase. Don't attempt to make it SMART; just briefly write what you think would be helpful.
- Step 2. Write four or five outcomes - single words or short phrases that describe what the objective aims to achieve.

For example, if the objective is to extend the scope of an HR Shares Services operation, the outcomes might be "cheaper", "quicker", "simpler", "responsive" HR services.

That is effectively a vision - it conveys a great deal about what needs to be delivered. But, concise outcomes communicate that without the inflexibility (or hard work) associated with SMART objectives.

- Step 3. But, there's a potential problem, people might interpret outcomes differently. For example, the manager might see the outcome "responsive" as meeting new, emerging customer needs, but the individual sees "responsive" as answering complaints quickly.

So, to be clear about what the outcomes mean, write their opposites. For example, the opposite of "cheaper" might be "wasteful". Or, the perhaps the slightly different "bureaucratic". Opposites clarify what we mean. And, if managers and team members create opposites by working together that produces real understanding and consensus.

There are a few important rules about opposites. For example, it is pointless using "not" or "un" in opposites (e.g. "unresponsive" and "not responsive"). Opposites should use different words to their outcomes.

- Step 4. If it helps, show the objective, its outcomes and opposites as ratings scales. For example...

OPPOSITE	Extend the scope of HR Shares Services					OUTCOME
Wasteful	1	2	3	4	5	Cheaper
Self-serving	1	2	3	4	5	Quicker
Procedural	1	2	3	4	5	Simpler
Out of touch	1	2	3	4	5	Responsive

Ratings scales will be very helpful when it comes to reviewing performance honestly and comprehensively.





To us, Agree might sometimes be a more intelligent approach to setting objectives and reviewing performance in today's turbulent world. It clearly conveys what needs to be achieved, but is adaptable. Agree isn't wrecked by what happens tomorrow.

## New thinking about people and performance

To some HR professionals Agree will be almost heresy; an abandonment of decades of HR practice. And, to some extent that's true. Agree is based on a completely different approach to working with people. It suggests a new paradigm for assessment and development, one with lots of fresh opportunities. Here's an explanation...

For decades we have aimed to strengthen organisational performance by classifying people. People have been put in boxes, such as ENTJ, High Potential, Shaper, etc... And, people have been measured with psychological tests, competency frameworks, appraisal ratings... all of which are forms of classification.

Some classification is essential, but it misses something really important, it omits how people see things. Classification imposes a framework, an HR model, and it ignores people's very personal perceptions, assumptions, logic, expectations, etc... And, those things are vitally important because perceptions alone determine what people do and how well they do it.

None of the new thinking' tools, like Agree, impose a framework; they elicit, question and utilize how people see things. The tools work with people's frameworks not HR's, and because that's something HR has never really done it is a rich source of new techniques and successes. "Infinitely more valuable" was how one manager described the value of the new approach compared with conventional assessment (Goodge, 2003).

## References

Goodge, P. and Coomber, J. (2009) Best Practice and Research in Performance Review, Available from Peter Goodge, tel +44 (0)7976 373 562.

Goodge P. (2003) Soft stuff, *Selection and Development Review*, 19(5), pp 16-19

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