Knowledge Worker
S.M.A.R.T. Ain't Enough
(August 2017)

There is no denying the importance of properly specifying an objective, whether it is for work, training, project, strategic planning, task accomplishment or other purposes. In this regard, much use and reliance is placed on the acronym SMART.

One source defines SMART as standing for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely. A search of the web reveals other definitions as well. My own recollection is that it stands for Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic and Time-tied. The person generally credited as the creator of the acronym, George Doran, defined SMART as standing for Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Realistic and Time-related.

What all the definitions of SMART have in common is that they constitute a framework for *specifying* goals and objectives, that is, a framework that spells out how objectives should be stated or written. But specification is only half the battle; the other, equally important half ties to *derivation*, with where you get them, hence the title of this month's column: "SMART Ain't Enough."

A Key Question: Where Do You Get Them?
Objectives are derived from a process of reflection and analysis. Some of the more common areas or aspects of the workplace where reflection and analysis will yield objectives include problems, processes, practices and people.

Problems (Or, if you prefer, "Opportunities")
Although many people prefer to label discrepancies in results as "opportunities" instead of "problems," the facts are that the workplace is full of such discrepancies, no matter how we choose to label them.

Discrepancies in results offer fruitful ground for the derivation and subsequent specification of objectives. At one company, for example, the quality of business intelligence was deemed totally inadequate. Why? Well, for one reason, there was no systematic effort to gather, compile and disseminate it. In short, there was no discernible business intelligence function. Guess what? A senior manager found himself with the objective of establishing a viable business intelligence function.

Processes
Work processes also offer fruitful ground for deriving work objectives. This is particularly true regarding any kind of ongoing or continuous improvement effort.   Consider the manager of a fairly sizable call center. Each year her objectives include one or more objectives related to achieving specific, measurable improvements in some aspect of call center performance.

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Practices

Practices, also known as methods and procedures, offer a third area where reflection and analysis can produce meaningful work objectives. These might quality as incremental improvements, work simplification or even that dreaded word, "reengineering." A simple example will illustrate the kind of payoff that can be found here. A manager whose unit periodically distributes printed materials to hundreds of sites throughout the continental United States (and overseas as well), was charged with reducing the costs of providing these materials. It turns out the materials were regularly reprinted and redistributed in their entirety owing to the way they were bound. A simple shift to loose-leaf binders enabled the printing and distribution of only the changed pages, greatly reducing cost and waste.

People

People, too, can be a source of objectives. For one thing, their developmental needs and requirements provide one source of objectives. For another, they can generate objectives related to other matters. In other words, people can set their own objectives.

Another Key Question: Who actually writes them?

In today's world of knowledge work and knowledge workers, management must rethink the role of the employee and revise its approach to getting what it wants. In a nutshell, this boils down to (a) getting employees to set/adopt goals that contribute to the organization and (b) supporting them as they pursue those goals. Work objectives take on important differences in this context. Instead of simply saddling employees with objectives specified by management, employees must be involved in and have a genuine say in setting and specifying goals and objectives. Why? Because if an employee is to achieve an objective the employee must be committed to its achievement. Why? Because it is often the case that prefigured routines can no longer be imposed in advance, compliance is irrelevant and supervision of mental activities is literally impossible. The locus of control over working itself has moved from management to the employee. Consequently, the employee must be viewed as an autonomous agent, acting on the employer's behalf and in the employer's best interest. And management must shift its focus from worker behavior to its rightful and appropriate locus of control: the work itself.

Conclusion

In the end, if our goals and objectives are to serve our purposes, they must meet two criteria: (1) they must be usefully derived and (2) properly specified and, as often as not, it is the employee who must do so.

Further Reading

Without a doubt, the single most popular paper on my web site is one titled "Writing Good Work Objectives: Where to Get Them and How to Write Them." It gets several thousand hits

each month, often more than 10,000, and has for several years. Readers interested in further exploring the distinction between the derivation and the specification of goals and objectives, including lots of illustrative examples, can find it at this link:
http://www.nickols.us/writing_work_objectives.htm

References
Doran, G.T. (1981). "There's a S.M.A.R.T. way to write management's goals and objectives." *Management Review. AMA FORUM*. 70 (11): 35-36.

About the Author
Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the manager partner of Distance Consulting LLC. His website is home to the award-winning Knowledge Worker's Tool Room and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns and access to them is available here.