The Goals Grid

A Tool for Clarifying Goals and Objectives

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This paper presents a highly-regarded tool for use in developing, specifying and clarifying goals and objectives. It is as useful in strategic planning as it is in operational planning or in problem solving or project management.

Introduction

Some years back, a meeting of the Operations Executive Council in a company where I was employed as an executive director was focused on the five-year corporate planning effort then getting underway. At this meeting I distributed a simple framework for classifying, organizing, and analyzing goals and objectives (see the Goals Grid in Figure 1 below). My colleagues saw this framework as very useful and so I was led to present it to a wider audience in a subsequently published article. The Goals Grid continues to be used and highly regarded by those who use it. It is an integral part of the problem solving approach I call "Solution Engineering."
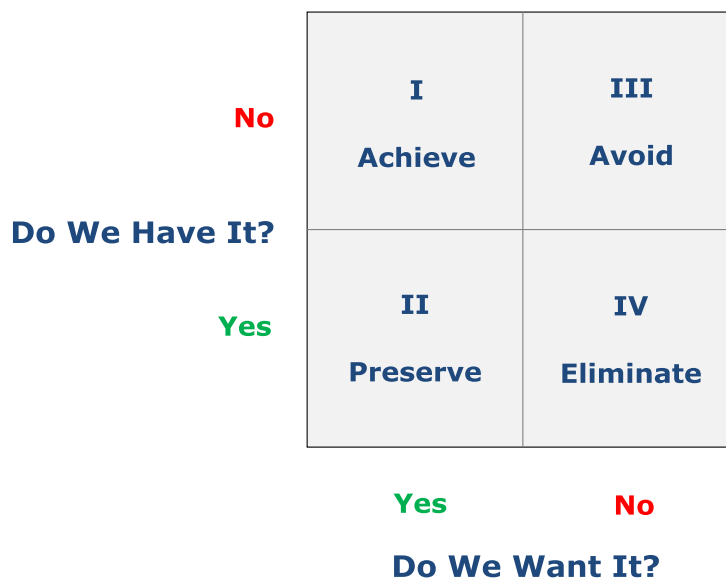
The Goals Grid

Figure 1 – The Goals Grid

First, however, some credit must be given where credit is due. In this case, credit is due two people: Ray Forbes and John Arnold [See End Note 1].

John Arnold's Questions

Several years ago, Ray Forbes and I were serving together as internal organization development (OD) and management consultants in the Navy's Human Resources Management Project. Ray had occasion to work with consultant John Arnold who was at the time consulting to the project. Ray told me of three questions John Arnold liked to ask his clients:

1. What are you trying to achieve?
2. What are you trying to preserve?
3. What are you trying to avoid?

These three questions highlight the multi-dimensional nature of actions and decisions. In other words, there are many different kinds of effects we might seek and that we might create [See

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End Note 2]. There is in these three questions a certain logical structure in which I saw a fourth question, one that is clearly related to the first three:

4. What are you trying to eliminate?

I also saw in the structure of this set of questions a link to problem solving, specifically to those two sets of conditions known as "the problem state" (*What Is* or what you have) and "the solved state" (*What Should Be* or what you want). This linkage led me to recast all four questions as follows:

1. What do you want that you don't have? (Achieve)
2. What do you want that you already have? (Preserve)
3. What don't you have that you don't want? (Avoid)
4. What do you have now that you don't want? (Eliminate)

The Goals Grid

The Goals Grid shown in Figure 1 was derived by arraying "Yes" and "No" states in relation to "Have" and "Want" conditions. The structure of this framework suggests and accommodates John Arnold's three questions as well as the fourth question that I added.

The Goals Grid shown in Figure 1 is a useful tool in achieving goal clarity. It prompts us to think about our goals and objectives in an organized fashion and from four different perspectives. This kind of structured, organized thinking about the aims and effects of our decisions and actions is particularly helpful in large, complex organizations where, as one wag said, "Everything affects everything else."

If our goals and objectives are multi-dimensional, our actions are doubly so. Intervention in complex systems typically has "ripple" effects. Mindful of Chester Barnard's cautions against the unintended and unforeseen effects of what we do, it is beneficial to consciously think through our objectives not just in terms of what we wish to achieve but also in terms of what we wish to preserve, what we wish to avoid and what we wish to eliminate.

Two major uses of this matrix or framework are discussed next.

Goal Clarity in Complex Systems

This section is based on an effort to improve the performance of one of the production systems in the operating division I managed at the time this article was originally written. This example illustrates just how multi-dimensional and complex our goals and objectives can be. We will also see how arriving at goal clarity in complex systems can require a more than modest effort.

The objective below was the starting point for the effort in question:

❏   Reduce the reject rate from 50% to less than 10%.

As stated, the objective above falls into Quadrant IV of the framework: Eliminate. It could be reworded in a more positive vein, perhaps as "Achieve a pass-through rate of 90% or better." But, in either case, action must aim at identifying and eliminating the causes of the rejects. The

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essence of this objective is getting rid of something that exists but is not wanted; namely, a reject rate that is too high (and, presumably, its contributing factors).

Adding a condition - "without increasing the cost of the operation" - makes the objective read as follows:

❑ Reduce the reject rate from 50% to less than 10%, without increasing the cost of the operation.

This new condition is clearly designed to avoid increasing costs in the course of reducing the reject rate. It also could be interpreted to mean that the aim is to preserve existing cost levels. But which is it - preserve or avoid? Does the distinction really matter? Why not go for both?

What has just been touched upon is the multi-dimensional nature of goals and objectives. Let's dig a little deeper regarding the objective immediately above and see what else we can uncover about some of the less than obvious dimensions of goals and objectives.

The processing operation to which the objective above pertains is a scanning operation, part of a larger registration system that is itself a subsystem in an even larger testing, licensing, and certification system. (These are still in operation today.) The reject rate was high because the registration forms being scanned contained gridding errors. These errors caused rejects when the documents were scanned and edited. These gridding errors were introduced by the registrants in the course of filling out the form. Eliminate the gridding errors and there would be no rejects and no work or costs associated with resolving rejects. The aim of reducing the error rate, therefore, was not merely to reduce the error rate and keep costs constant but to actually reduce the costs of processing the forms. This could be accomplished as a result of eliminating the errors which, in turn, would eliminate the work of resolving the rejects attributable to these errors. We are thus drawn closer to a different version of the original objective, which could be stated in two very basic ways:

❑ Reduce the number of errors made by registrants.

❑ Improve the quality (accuracy) of the registration forms received from registrants.

What emerged as a result of thinking through the original objective was the fact that there wasn't a single objective, there were several: reduce errors, reduce rework, improve quality, and reduce costs. We can even spot some relationships among these objectives. Reducing errors reduces rework and improves quality, both of which reduce costs. There are connections here and thinking through the four quadrants in the goals grid helped make them. Helping make such connections is a major factor in the value of the Goals Grid.

As we will see next, the Goals Grid is also helpful in examining some of the less obvious aspects and implications of your objectives.

Patterns, Politics and Conflict

If anything is generally true of people it is this: they will look for patterns and attach meaning to the patterns they find. Consequently, I find it useful to examine the classifications, patterns, and

possible conflicts in my goals and objectives before announcing them. This can be especially beneficial if there are any unknown, unintentional, and unwanted patterns present.

One very interesting and often quite illuminating "political" exercise is to assemble a list of objectives (your own or someone else's), classify them in terms of the four quadrants making up the Goals Grid, and then look for patterns in the way in which the objectives are distributed among the four quadrants.

I recall still a case from my consulting days when, after thoroughly examining the objectives of the president of a certain company, I came away absolutely convinced his goals were as follows:

- ❑ Eliminate all threats
- ❑ Avoid all risks
- ❑ Preserve the status quo
- ❑ Achieve (and thus risk) absolutely nothing

In any case, goals and objectives can be classified in accordance with the Goals Grid by anyone of a mind to do so. Suppose, for instance, you find that all or most of your objectives cluster in the "Eliminate" quadrant. Might this suggest a preoccupation with the negative side of things or is it simply that you're caught up in a bad situation? Suppose your objectives are equally divided between the "Preserve" and "Avoid" quadrants. Could this indicate an unwillingness to take risks?

Another useful exercise is to think about potential conflict between your objectives and someone else's objectives. Who might wish to avoid what you're trying to achieve? Who might wish to preserve what you're trying to eliminate? Turn those same questions around: Who might gain from achieving what you're trying to avoid? Who might profit from eliminating what you're striving to preserve?

Finally, examining the distribution of goals and objectives in the Goals Grid can stimulate thinking about neglected categories of goals and objectives. This, of course, takes us back to the first use of the Goals Grid and so here is where we'll end our discussion.

Summary

The Goals Grid is a simple, easy-to-use tool for developing goal clarity.

The Goals Grid provides a structure for examining the multi-dimensional nature of decisions and actions being contemplated in an organizational setting.

The Goals Grid also provides a structure for analyzing patterns in goals and objectives and for detecting potential conflict with the goals and objectives of others.

In short, the Goals Grid helps answer some very basic questions:

- ❑ What are we really up to here?
- ❑ Do we have all the bases covered?
- ❑ What are we overlooking?
- ❑ Have we adequately thought this thing through?

❑   How do our various goals and objectives relate to one another?
❑   What do the patterns tell us about our willingness to risk, to change?
❑   Are we in conflict with others?

There is no procedure to be followed here, no dogma to be imposed or enforced, and no easy answers to what are basically tough questions. The Goals Grid is just a framework for thinking about and perhaps asking some questions about your goals and objectives. If you want to use it, help yourself. If you don't, that's your call. In the meantime, I'll tell you what I do with my copy of the Goals Grid: I keep it posted on the wall directly in front of me so that it reminds me of things I ought to be thinking about, things like objectives, patterns, politics and conflict. Most of all, it reminds me that when I am bent on achieving one thing, it is also frequently the case that I am concerned with preserving, avoiding and eliminating some other things.

Additional Sources

1. Goals Grid Job Aid. A blank Goals Grid for use in organizing goals and objectives in the four categories.
2. The Goals Grid: A New Tool for Strategic Planning. Illustrates the use of the Goals Grid in strategic planning. Includes a couple of real-life examples.
3. The Goals Grid is included as a template in the SmartDraw graphics software package.
4. Writing Good Work Objectives: Where to Get Them and How to Write Them. This paper deals with the derivation (where you get them) and the specification (how to write them) of work objectives. There is an .htm version and a .pdf version.
5. Goal Clarity. The April 2015 Knowledge Worker Column which deals with several factors that affect the task of achieving goal clarity.

End Notes

1. When this article was published, Ray Forbes was Director of Organization Development at Northwest Airlines. He is currently a professor in the business school at Franklin University in Columbus, Ohio. John Arnold was and still is, so far as I know, president of ExecuTrak Systems, Inc., a consulting firm located in Waltham, Massachusetts.

    I spoke with John Arnold prior to the original publication of this article and confirmed that neither the fourth question nor the four-cell Goals Grid presented in this article were part of his original thinking on the matter. His original questions were meant to establish criteria against which possible courses of action could be evaluated. The precise wording of John's questions, which can be found in his book, *The Art of Decision Making*, is as follows:

    ❑   What do you want to achieve by any decision you make?
    ❑   What do you want to preserve by any decision you make?
    ❑   What do you want to avoid by any decision you make?

2. Chester Barnard, in *The Functions of the Executive*, took care to point out that the actions we take to realize one set of outcomes often produce a set of outcomes entirely unintended or unforeseen. He used this fact of organizational life to draw a distinction between the effectiveness and the efficiency of solutions. A solution, according to Barnard, is effective if it produces the desired results and it is ineffective if it does not. A so-

lution is efficient to the extent it produces no offsetting "side effects" and inefficient to the extent it does, regardless of its effectiveness or ineffectiveness.

References

1. Arnold, John D. (1980). *The Art of Decision Making*. AMACOM, New York.
2. Barnard, Chester A (1938). *The Functions of the Executive*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Contact the Author

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