

# Will the Real SMART Goals Please Stand Up?

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Among the myriad of I-O psychology practices, goal setting has provided unparalleled utility. Backed by years of research data supporting its viability, goal-setting techniques work and work well (Locke & Latham, 1990). Because it works so well, goal setting is an extremely popular intervention across all types of professions. Surely, most of us at one point in our careers have expounded upon the virtues of goal setting and its impact on motivation and cognition. One tool that has simplified teaching the principles of goal setting (especially to non-I-O psychologists) is the use of what have been called “SMART goals.” The acronym and mnemonic device, SMART embodies the fundamental practices necessary for achieving increased motivation and improving the odds that one will actually accomplish a given set of goals. This has been an invaluable tool for quickly communicating years of robust research regarding what makes for an effective, motivating goal, and appears in countless training and self-help materials.

Recently however, I learned that *my* SMART goals might be rather dumb! Having worked with SMART goals for a number of years, I came across an interpretation in a managerial training manual that was slightly different from my own understanding. This material explained that T in SMART stood for *Trackable*. How could this be? I always thought that the T represented *Time-bound*, referring to the notion that including a time frame inherently increases motivation. Well, it occurred to me that maybe I didn't really know SMART goals after all. Intrigued (code for ego-threatened) and a bit befuddled, I decided to do some research, albeit unsystematically, via the Internet.

I was interested in knowing how others were representing SMART goals and if my understanding was simply an anomaly. So I fired up my preferred search engine using the search term “SMART goals.” I examined the first 40 Web sites that contained information about SMART goals, which included a full range of sites from fitness information, to state agency planning manuals, business articles, and university counseling centers. Here's what I found.

The most common representation (approximately 10 sites) represented SMART goals as: *Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant* and *Time-bound*. Beyond this representation however, there was considerable variance including the following:

- S** Simple, specific with a stretch, sensible, significant.
- M** Meaningful, motivating.
- A** Acceptable, achievable, action-oriented, accountable, as-if-now, agreed, agreed-upon, actionable, assignable.

- R** Realistic, reviewable, relative, rewarding, reasonable, results-oriented, relevant to a mission.
- T** Timelines, time-frame, time-stamped, tangible, timely, time-based, time-specific, time-sensitive, timed, time-scaled, time-constrained, time-phased, time-limited, time-driven, time-related, time-line, timed and toward what you want, truthful.

Looking at these various representations, I soon realized that the individuals responsible for communicating this information knew at least one thing about goal setting—goals should be SMART. That is, goals should be set based on some representation of these letters. Although several representations come close to capturing the basic premise of goal setting, many stretch even liberal interpretations of the research (e.g., Simple? Truthful?). Maybe I'm being a bit too cynical, but I'm not sure some of these representations go much beyond "do your best" goals, which we know are not effective (Latham, 2001).

So it seems SMART goals have experienced an "acronym drift" of sorts, whereby mass representations of the tool have strayed far from the research on which it was based, much like an old-fashioned game of telephone we played as children. I won't conjecture on the evolutionary factors that have influenced this drift, but it seems safe to say that SMART goals have taken on multiple lives. I fully support tools that increase our ability to communicate complexity in a meaningful and useful way; however, when the tool becomes the practice, and the thinking behind it wanes, this is anything but smart. Further, based on the current scientific state of goal setting, SMART goals may not fully represent the latest research that includes for example the importance of efficacy and feedback (E.A. Locke, personal communication, November 9, 2001). Could it be time for a SMART goals overhaul? I did encounter a few Web sites that included "efficacy" and "rewarding" yielding "SMARTER" goals. Nevertheless, who knows how long this expanded representation might last before it drifts as well.

Practically speaking, the representations I found are likely to "do no harm" to the individuals consuming them; yet I couldn't help but think how people might be cheated out of an authentic opportunity to achieve goal success by being exposed to real SMART goals. Of course, given that my "research" was less than scientific, I don't want to jump to any unfounded conclusions. After all, part of the value of SMART goals is that it focuses people on the act of setting goals and prompts discussion of these goals with others—which in and of itself holds merit. In all, only one thing remains clear, not all SMART goals are created equal.

## References

- Latham, G. P. (2001). The reciprocal effects of science on practice: Insights from the practice and science of goal setting. *Canadian Psychology, 42*(1), 1–11.
- Locke, E. A. & Latham, G. P. (1990). A theory of goal setting and task performance. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.