

Setting S.M.A.R.T. Goals

BY PAT THOMASHEFSKY

This intelligent acronym can set you on the path to quality success.

UNFORTUNATE OUTCOMES ARE TOO OFTEN the product of hard work. Climbing the corporate ladder is only rewarding when it's leaning against the right building. Setting goals and objectives is an essential ingredient in a successful quality management system and is integral to AISC's certification programs—and such goals are best developed carefully to avoid less-than-satisfactory outcomes.

What is the difference between a goal and an objective? Goals are often thought of as visions or the “grand plan” whereas objectives define strategies. The two terms are often used interchangeably or together to define a purpose.

Many successful businesses use “S.M.A.R.T.” goals and define objectives to meet them. The acronym S.M.A.R.T. has a number of different variations, all of which can be used to provide a more comprehensive definition for the development of goals and objectives:

S - Specific, Significant, Stretching

Goals should be straightforward and emphasize what you want to happen. They should signify what you are going to do, why you are doing it, and how you plan to do it. A goal should be achievable *and* spark action and real commitment.

M - Measurable, Meaningful, Motivational

If you can't measure it, you can't manage it! It's as simple as that. Goals should be meaningful to you and motivate action. Establish criteria for measuring progress toward attainment of each goal and objective. When you measure your progress, you stay on track, reach your target dates, and experience the motivation that spurs you on to continued success.

A - Attainable, Acceptable, Action-Oriented

When you identify goals that are important to you personally, you figure out ways to make them happen. Develop the attitudes, abilities, and the acceptance to accomplish your goals within your company. This process also uncovers previously overlooked opportunities to attain these goals.

R - Realistic, Relevant, Reasonable, Rewarding, Results-Orientated

Keep in mind that realistic is not a synonym for easy. Goals should be attainable, but with some effort. If the goal is too difficult then you set the stage for failure but if it isn't demanding enough, it sends the message of low importance. Therefore, the learning curve should not be a vertical slope. Rather, form your goals with results in mind. Make them rewarding and relevant to your business.

T - Time-Based, Timely, Tangible, Traceable

Always set a time frame; a long-range goal should have measurable milestones. Putting an endpoint gives a clear target. If you don't set a timeline, the commitment is too vague. Or, it tends not to happen at all because you feel you can start at any time; there is no urgency to start taking action. However, your timeline for accomplishing the goal must be measurable, attainable, and realistic. If you can make the milestones measurable and the path traceable, accomplishments will be more real to everyone involved.

Joe's Story

How about an example? Let's say that “Joe's” phone and e-mail are ringing and pinging with field issues and customer complaints, and he is hearing the same from the rest of the team. He suggests a goal: Reduce field issues and customer complaints by 10% quarterly.

That sounds like a good plan and also relates to his company's quality policy. But is it a S.M.A.R.T. goal? Joe tests his goal against the worksheet titled “S.M.A.R.T. Goal Testing Worksheet” (located on the following page).

In Joe's case, both field issues and customer complaints are interchangeable. He wants to stop putting out fires and use his resources to build the business. Whether a 10% quarterly reduction is significant or a bit of a stretch will be determined as the results are measured. He knows it is meaningful, and everyone is certainly motivated to stop those calls! But what is the best way to measure this?

Well, it can be measured just by the sheer number of field issues and customer complaints. That would be the way to measure the success of any effort made toward the goal of reducing complaints by a specific amount. Since Joe doesn't want to make more work for himself or his team by making measuring a job in itself, he will ask for some action from the rest of the team. It is time to do some brainstorming.

Joe calls a 15-minute “stand-up” meeting—no chairs, just ideas. Even the planning is time-based. Joe sends out a memo the day before and asks one specific question: “What are our field issues and customer complaints related to?” The memo also contains a directive: “Come to the meeting prepared with a list of brief examples.” He also suggests some example categories to spur creativity: weld defects, bolting, material delivery, etc. The next day everyone



Pat Thomashefsky is lead auditor with AISC Certification. She can be reached at patt@qmconline.org.

Quality Corner is a monthly feature that covers topics ranging from how to specify a certified company to how long it takes to become a certified company. If you are interested in browsing our electronic archive, please visit www.aisc.org/QualityCorner.

S.M.A.R.T. Goal Testing Worksheet

Goal: Reduce field issues and customer complaints by 10% quarterly.

S Is it **SPECIFIC**? (Can I answer Who? What? Where? When? Why?)

Evaluation: A 10% reduction in complaints quarterly is pretty specific. Also, this process will ensure not only that we know who, what, where, and when, but it will also help us to discover why.

M Is it **MEASURABLE**? Will I be able to measure progress? (How many/much?)

Evaluation: We will need to develop a process to easily measure the number of complaints we receive and what they pertain to, and record our progress.

A Is it **ATTAINABLE**? (Can this really happen? What steps are involved?)

Evaluation: Every effort will be made to do this—or else! We are not setting the bar too high at 10%, but it will take some effort.

R Is it **REALISTIC**? (What knowledge, skills, and abilities are necessary to reach this goal?)

Evaluation: Once we begin measuring, we will be able to see what will be needed to resolve the issues and prevent them from occurring again. We *can* do this!

T Is it **TIME-BOUND**? (Can I set fixed timelines? What are they?)

Evaluation: We'll commit to this plan and keep it as an agenda item on our meeting schedule, taking action along the way to make the quarterly number.

shows up and the list begins. In this type of methodology, no discussion or arguments are accepted, just ideas. The purpose in brainstorming is to focus more on quantity than quality to start.

In those 15 minutes, Joe has his list to collate, chunk, and consider. Then he can shut his door and spend one hour reviewing the results. Joe also has the accumulation of complaints from the past few months. At the end of the hour he has his list of categories! Everyone gets the list. When a call or e-mail is received, it is put into a category; in this case, a “tic” mark is made next to its reference. (These are converted to numbers in the table below, which tracks complaint categories by date.)

Field Issues and Customer Complaints

Date	Categories				
	Weld Defects	Delivery	Drawings	Material	Other
1/8/09	2	4	1	1	8
1/9/09	1	1	1	1	5
1/12/09	2	3			7
1/13/09		1	3		3
1/14/09		5			6
1/15/09	1	3	2	1	3
1/16/09					9

Joe determines that two weeks would be a reasonable amount of time to collect the data and at the end of that time, he will

S.M.A.R.T. Goal Measurement Worksheet

Quality Policy: It is the policy of our company to meet customer requirements.

S.M.A.R.T. Goal: Reduce customer complaints by 10% quarterly.

Date	Strategy/Action Plan	Responsibility	Timeline	Evidence of effectiveness
1/6/09	Brainstorm for reasons.	All	15 min on Wed.	Complete. I have the data.
1/8/09	Develop complaint categories.	Joe	1 hour	Complete. I spent one hour developing the categories.
1/8 to 1/20/09	Collect data.	All	2 weeks	Everyone is pitching in.
1/20/09	Review results and progress. Take needed action.	Joe	1 hour	It looks like there are too many “other” categories. I need to regroup the categories. But we'll take action on the top three immediately.
1/20 to 1/27/09	Collect more data.	All	2 weeks	I gave everyone a new list. They are still pitching in.
1/27/09	Review results and progress.	Joe	1 hour	OK, now we have it! Only a few “others,” and our volume is reduced. I wonder why? What happened?
1/29/09	Develop action plan to reduce complaints.	Joe and All	2 hours	Called a meeting to discuss results and began the action plan. The sequencing of the jobs through the shop is affecting delivery. Update at morning meetings daily.

review the results. Joe really thought that welding defects would be most prevalent, but it looks like that issue comes in third, with delivery issues topping the list. Of course, everyone continues collecting data so that the organization can measure the success of their goal to reduce the overall number of complaints by 10% this quarter. The next step is to use this data to determine a strategy and an action plan to make it happen. Joe uses the worksheet above to keep track of the

action plan, responsibilities, timeline, and evidence of effectiveness.

Whatever your strategy in applying the S.M.A.R.T. methodology—be it Joe's or otherwise—setting goals and objectives is an integral part of planning in a quality management system. Not to confuse you with another acronym, but it is the P in the PDCA cycle—Plan, Do, Check, Act. But that's a whole other Quality Corner article.