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
It 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
show 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.)

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 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.