
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

LET'S GET REAL: SMART GOALS ARE DUMB

RANDY EMELO



Most everyone knows about SMART goals: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound. Chances are you have used this mnemonic acronym at some point in your career to help you focus in on a performance goal, or complete a complex and multifaceted project. I myself have used it and have taught others about it.

Unfortunately, the SMART process is not one-size-fits-all. The problem arises when we start using SMART for all goals, regardless of what type of outcome or focus we want. In fact, we have been approaching SMART incorrectly. The SMART acronym actually guides the setting of objectives, not goals. When it comes to establishing developmental goals, SMART goals are all wrong.

GOALS VS. OBJECTIVES

Goals and objectives are often confused, but serve two very different purposes.

Goals are the purpose towards which actions are directed, an aspirational desire that is worth striving towards. Goals are not measurable or tangible.

Objectives are things that one's actions are expected to obtain, specific actions that result in goal attainment. Objectives must be measurable and tangible.

With these definitions in mind, I contend that when establishing developmental goals, it is better to avoid the rigor of the SMART acronym. While SMART goals are great for establishing performance measures, they conflict greatly with developmental activities. Instead, I recommend REAL goals for career development. The REAL acronym stands for Relevant, Experimental, Aspirational, and Learning-based.

When creating developmental goals, ideally you will describe these four attributes:

Relevant—indicate why it is important and worthwhile.

Experimental—imply development activity that will lead to greater insight.

Aspirational—identify an area of desired development.

Learning-based—express outcomes that are focused on gaining capability.

For example, look at these developmental goals. Notice how the REAL elements come into play:

Goal: Develop more strategic thinking. I want to improve my ability to see the big picture and take a longer view of critical business trends. I want to rise above the tactical day-to-day

details that I manage, and focus on the developing trends within my discipline.

Goal: Develop better remote management. I want to increase my effectiveness as a team leader with the direct reports that I manage remotely. I want to make better use of virtual technology to plan, connect, and collaborate.

Goal: Develop improved time management. I want to spend more time on important work activity. I want to learn ways to more effectively manage my priorities.

If these developmental goals had been written using the SMART acronym, they would look vastly different. They also would shift from being developmental goals to becoming performance objectives.

LET'S GET REAL

When it comes to personal or professional development, REAL goals provide a clear criterion against which activity can be planned and progress can be assessed. By doing so, we place the focus on relevant, experimental, aspirational and learning-based activities that can provide us with immediate next steps to take that will lead to greater awareness. The feedback loop becomes one where we identify our REAL goal, try it out, assess how we did, and then adjust or repeat depending on the results. This is much different than focusing only on measurable outcomes, as you would with SMART goals.

I firmly believe that using REAL goals to focus on your professional development will help you invest in gaining capabilities that will equip you for your preferred future. If you happen to be a manager of others, I encourage you to help your direct reports to set both SMART goals for short-term productivity objectives and REAL goals for developmental purposes. There's a place for both; it's just a matter of finding the right circumstances.

REAL GOALS IN ACTION

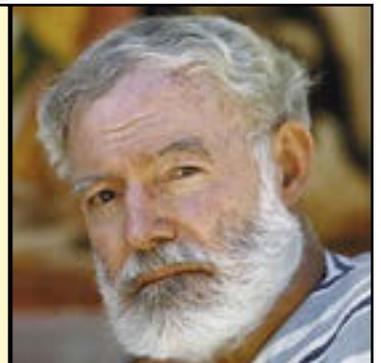
As I said previously, SMART goals guide the setting of objectives, not goals. To establish developmental goals, we need REAL goals.

When it comes to personal or professional development, REAL goals provide a clear criterion against which activity can be planned and progress can be assessed. For example, a REAL goal may be that you want to “Become more effective at developing others.” When you apply the REAL principles, you would state that: “I want to improve my ability to identify and bring the best out in those who report to me. I want to understand and guide others into greater personal effectiveness by prioritizing developmental goal setting and dialogue.”

Because REAL goals focus on development (rather than objectives), these goals are best applied in conjunction with a mentor, coach, or advisor. The development conversation that

It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end.

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)
Nobel Prize American author
Mentored by Gertrude Stein
[Biography](#)



occurs as a result of REAL goals provides the fuel you will need to apply, assess, and adjust your goals.

With this in mind, here are some considerations for putting REAL goals into action.

PLAN TO FAIL.

This may feel counterintuitive, but REAL goals are more effective when they surface limitations in understanding or ability. These shortcomings serve as the catalyst for deeper developmental discussion and exploration between you and your mentor, coach, or advisor. It will be more impactful to have thoughtful and meaningful conversations about what you don't know or what you failed at, than it will be to only talk about the things you did right or well, or the successes you've had.

SET SHORT FEEDBACK CYCLES.

REAL goals need to be assessed and discussed routinely, or you risk losing the generative power that comes from new learning experiences. It is better to have discussions right away after an action was taken toward a goal so that the details are fresh in everyone's mind. Because of this, it is preferable to plan a small action that can easily be taken, and then discuss the experience within a few days.

DISCUSS THE GORY DETAILS.

REAL goals should lead you to take actions that are uncomfortable and that produce awkward results—and that is a good thing! Life is messy. Nothing is ever perfect, and the challenges we overcome go a long way toward building not only knowledge, but also character. Therefore, it is helpful to avoid the impulse to only tell the pleasant bits when discussing developmental discoveries. Push into the areas of personal difficulty. It is healthy and necessary to discuss your approach, attitude, and observations surrounding the planned activity.

TEST YOUR ASSUMPTIONS.

REAL goals will challenge the ways that you are used to seeing and reacting to things. Because REAL goals focus on personal and professional development (rather than just project outcomes), they can help you gain a deeper understanding of yourself, and give you a way to progress in your development. In fact, when learning new behaviors or skills, it is common to face uncertainty and experience unexpected results. Both uncertainty and surprise speak to areas of unexplored understanding, which actually provides a wonderful opportunity for you to dive into. Discussing your assumptions with your mentor, coach, or advisor can lead to a breakthrough in thought and action.



“Dreaming about being an actress is more exciting than being one.”

~ Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962) ~
American actress and lifelong Democrat
Mentored by Lee Strasberg
[Biography](#)

STAY THE COURSE.

REAL goals typically take focused and sustained effort to produce lasting results. The types of goals you work on with the REAL model often tackle the big and gnarly issues in your life. For example, you may focus on becoming a strategic thinker, or maybe you want to work on becoming a better communicator. These are not goals that will be achieved overnight; nor are they goals that can be glossed over. Be warned that these goals may take time, and be kind to yourself when working toward these goals. Remember, when developing new skills, behaviors or understandings, you need to be prepared to take many small steps before realizing the benefits.

You will be able to achieve amazing results by using REAL goals as a focal point for your professional development. If you happen to be a manager of others, work to help them understand the principles behind REAL goals, and commit to applying this model to activities and conversations you have for developmental purposes. If you are an individual learner, talk to your mentor, coach, or advisor about REAL goals and ways you can start using them in your development conversations. How could you apply REAL goals in your work?

(This article was adapted from two blog posts by the author and is reprinted here with the gracious permission of River.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Randy Emelo is the founder of [River](#), a Denver-based company that builds mentoring, coaching, and social learning software. Randy is a prolific author, speaker, and thought leader on topics related to collaboration, mentoring, social learning, and talent development. Randy's new book, *Modern Mentoring*, is available [here](#).

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“If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up someplace else.”

~ Yogi Berra (1925-2015) ~

American baseball player and manager

Mentor to Derek Jeter & Jorge Posada; mentored by Bill Dickey

[Biography](#)

