SMART Goal Examples for Developing Leadership Competencies

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When setting development goals, people have little trouble translating the tangible ones into SMART goals. "Increase revenue by X% within six months"…."Reduce customer wait time on the phone by 4 minutes by end of Q3"….and so on.

On the other hand, when it comes to goals targeting "soft skills" or corporate competencies, people often struggle to create SMART goals. They're often pretty broad and general. It's not uncommon to see something like, ""*Be a better communicator" o*r the ever popular *"improve my leadership skills."*

While it can be more challenging to make SMART goals for competency-based areas as compared to more technical work (widget production, customer satisfaction, financials, etc.), it's certainly not impossible. In fact, the reason I've typically seen clients struggle to build SMART goals targeting competencies is because they lack understanding of the *behaviors* associated with the competency. It's tough to be specific with your goals when you're not clear on what exactly needs to change. Even tougher to determine success measures.

In this post I will review two SMART goal examples with a focus on specificity and measurability. Less focus will be given to the "ART" because 1) only you can determine if your goal is attainable and realistic, and 2) you surely don't need to see examples to learn how to specify a timeframe (but if you do please share in the comments so I know for future!)

Also, these are examples of *goals* as opposed to *activities* which support the goal. The activities are the things you do and the goal is the reason you're doing the activities. People have no problem coming up with the activities, they're pretty much structured task lists (e.g., take my team to lunch once a month, attend change management training, etc.). They're also often mistakenly referred to as goals. They're not. Therefore, the SMART goal examples presented here focus on the purpose or reason for completing development activities. Ideally, you should establish the goals prior to determining the activities.

Specific and Measurable SMART Goal Examples

To make competency-based SMART goals more specific and measurable, follow these four steps:

1. Add context
2. Consider desired state
3. Identify success measures

4. Identify data points to capture the success measures

Example 1: "Be a Better Communicator"

Step 1: Provide Context

Communication is such a broad area. Think about all the types of communication you engage in throughout the day. Verbal conversations with clients about deliverables. Emails to your work team with announcements and updates. Questions you ask in meetings. The list goes on.

To make this goal more specific, think about what it looks like when the communication transpires. What kind of communication is it – verbal or written? Who is the audience? What kind of information is being communicated? Here are few examples of what "communication" might mean:

- Deliver verbal presentations to senior leadership for quarterly update meetings.
- Write emails to direct reports assigning them a new client or project.
- Provide feedback to members of a project team regarding their performance.

Step 2: Determine Desired State

Next think about your desired state. What aspect of the communication would you like to improve? Clarity? Comprehensiveness? Message quality?

- Deliver verbal presentations to senior leadership for quarterly update meetings *that are clear and concise.*
- Write emails to direct reports assigning them a new client or project *that provide enough information for them to begin working immediately.*
- Provide feedback to members of a project team regarding their performance *that is viewed as meaningful and timely.*

Step 3: Identify Success Measures

Think about how you will know you've communicated successfully.

Deliver verbal presentations to senior leadership for quarterly update meetings that are clear and concise.

- Senior leaders describe the presentations as clear and concise.
- Minimal signs of confusion by the audience during the presentation.

Write emails to direct reports assigning them a new client or project that provide enough information for them to begin working immediately.

- Direct reports indicate they received sufficient information to get started immediately.
- Client indicates satisfaction with amount of time it took to get started.
- The actual amount of time it takes for direct report and new client to make first contact.

Provide feedback to members of a project team regarding their performance that is viewed as meaningful and timely.

- Team members indicate the feedback they receive is meaningful.
- Team members indicate the feedback they receive is timely.

- Amount of time between delivery of the feedback and the event or incident it's about.

Step 4: Identify Data Points

What data is available or can you collect to evaluate your success measures?

Deliver verbal presentations to senior leadership for quarterly update meetings that are clear and concise

Success Measure	Data Point
Senior leaders describe the presentations as clear and concise	Conduct a feedback survey following each meeting
	Ask leaders individually for feedback following each meeting
Minimal signs of confusion by the audience during the presentation	Track the number of audience requests to clarify or rephrase something
	Track the number of questions and comments during the meeting that suggest misunderstanding (For both of these examples you would need to establish a target number to aim for)

Write emails to direct reports assigning them a new client or project that provide enough information for them to begin working immediately

Success Measure	Data Point
Direct reports indicate they received sufficient information to get started immediately	Ask direct reports if this was achieved either through a feedback survey or individually
Client indicates satisfaction with amount of time it took to get started	Ask clients if this was achieved either through a feedback survey or individually
The actual amount of time it takes for direct report and new client to make first contact	Create a log to track this data over time and review on a regular basis to determine pattern. (Be sure to set a target to aim for – e.g., no more than 5 days or whatever is appropriate).

Provide feedback to members of a project team regarding their performance that is viewed as meaningful and timely

Success Measure	Data Point
Team members indicate the feedback they receive is meaningful	Ask direct reports if this was achieved either through a feedback survey or individually
Team members indicate the feedback they receive is timely	Ask direct reports if this was achieved either through a feedback survey or individually
Amount of time between delivery of the feedback and the event or incident it's about	Track the date of the incident or event you wish to deliver feedback on and the date you deliver the feedback. Set a target to deliver within X# days

Example 2: "Improve My Leadership Skills

Step 1: Provide Context

Many leaders seek to improve their leadership skills, but like communication, leadership is a very broad area. Just a few examples of what "leadership" skills could mean to provide context in this example are:

- Provide coaching to direct reports.
- Motivate employees working on a project.
- Build a strong team.

Step 2: Determine Desired State

Again, think about your desired state. What impact will your leadership have on employees and the organization?

- Provide coaching to direct reports *so they are able to independently resolve technical issues quickly and correctly.*
- Motivate employees in the organization *to stay focused and persevere through challenges* when working on a project.
- Build a strong team *that collaborates to build innovative products.*

Step 3: Identify success measures

How will you know you've achieved the desired state?

Provide coaching to direct reports by so they are able to independently resolve technical issues quickly and correctly.

- Direct reports indicate they felt supported and coached during difficult situations.
- Successful resolution of difficult issues by direct reports.
- Reduction in number of complaints/delays/returns/whatever your negative metric is.

Motivate employees in the organization to stay focused and persevere through challenges when working on a project.

- Employees indicate you are taking action that helps keep them focused.
- Employees continue to work on the project during challenging times.
- The team successfully achieves a challenging project or goal.

Build a strong team that collaborates to build innovative products.

- Feedback from team indicates members feel they work well together.
- Successful delivery of an innovative product by the team.

Step 4: Identify Data Points

Once again, identify what data can be collected to evaluate success measures.

Provide coaching to direct reports by so they are able to independently resolve technical issues quickly and correctly

Success Measure	Data Point
Direct reports indicate they felt supported and coached during difficult situations	Ask direct reports if this was achieved either through a feedback survey or individually
Successful resolution of difficult issues by direct reports	Track difficult issues encountered by direct reports and what you did to support / coach them
Reduction in number of complaints/delays/returns/whatever your negative metric is	Set a target number to aim for and track the data point identified

Motivate employees in the organization to stay focused and persevere through challenges when working on a project

Success Measure	Data Point
Employees indicate you are taking action that helps keep them focused	Ask direct reports if this was achieved either through a feedback survey or individually
Employees continue to work on the project during challenging times	Track team turnover including documentation of time periods that posed greater challenge than usual
The team successfully achieves a challenging project or goal	Was the goal achieved successfully or not?

Build a strong team that collaborates to build innovative products

Success Measure	Data Point
Feedback from team indicates they feel they work well together	Ask direct reports if this was achieved either through a feedback survey or individually
Successful delivery of an innovative product by the team	Did the team collaborate to build and deliver an innovative product?

Final Tips

Make sure your goal is achievable and realistic given your circumstances. It is important that your goal presents you with sufficient challenge, but also a reasonable likelihood you will succeed at achieving it as long as you do the work required. Apply this rationale when assigning timeframes as well – give yourself enough time but not so much time that the goal is irrelevant by the time you are scheduled to complete it. Very often your timeframe will be determined by how long it will take you to complete the activities that support the goal.