

## Setting Realistic Goals

Performance is when an employee is achieving a goal in a highly effective and efficient manner and when that goal is closely aligned with achieving the overall goals of the organization. Employees can be very busy in their roles, but that does not mean they are high-performing if their roles are not directly contributing toward achieving the overall goals of the organization. The first step toward solving this problem is to establish clear performance goals. Some people have a strong negative reaction toward setting goals because they fear goals as “the law” that must be maintained and never broken. Some people fear they will never achieve the goals. Others have disdain for goals because goals seem to take the “heart” out of their work.

## Advantages of Using Performance Goals in the Workplace

Despite the negative views that one can have about goals, they hold certain strong advantages in the workplace. Goals:

- Provide clear direction to supervisors and employees.
- Form a common frame of reference around which they can effectively communicate.
- Clearly indicate success, and can cultivate a strong sense of fulfillment for those working toward achieving the goals.
- Help clarify the specific expectations of the supervisor and employee.

## Employee Performance Gaps, Growth Gaps, Opportunity Gaps and Training Gaps

Goals can be useful for specifying expectations and for setting measurements of progress in working to fill four types of gaps:

### Performance Gaps

These gaps are identified during the employee performance management process. Ideally, performance gaps are addressed by performance improvement plans. Performance improvement plans are sometimes a last-ditch effort at helping a person to improve his/her performance. Ideally, the performance problem is addressed through ongoing feedback and adjustments during regular one-on-one meetings. In these plans, goals are established to improve performance, and may include, for example, increased effort on the part of the employee, support from his/her supervisor, and certain training and resources to assist the person in his/her development. Dedicated employees can greatly appreciate having specific performance goals for them to achieve in order to keep their jobs, verify their competence to their supervisor and accomplish overall professional development.

### Growth Gaps

These gaps are identified during career planning. Employees perceive certain areas of knowledge and skills that they would like to accomplish in order to qualify for certain future roles and positions. Employees often appreciate having clear-cut goals that mark what they need to do to advance in their careers.

## Opportunity Gaps

These gaps are identified when a sudden opportunity arises for the employee. If the person is highly interested in taking advantage of the opportunity, then he or she will appreciate knowing exactly what goals must be achieved to take advantages of the opportunity. Growth gaps and opportunity gaps are very similar.

## Training Gaps

These gaps are identified when hiring a new employee, during performance management planning or career planning. Gaps are usually in terms of areas of knowledge, skills or abilities (competencies). Training plans can be designed with clear-cut training goals to give direction to the employee or trainer. Whatever the type of goal, it is critical that the employee have strong ownership and commitment to achieving the goal.

## Performance Goals Should Be SMART

You can help ensure that goals are agreeable to supervisor and employee by ensuring that they are highly involved in identifying the goals. When setting goals with others, strive to describe them to be "SMART." This acronym stands for goals that are:

### **Specific: (Significant)**

- What is to be accomplished
- Why are we accomplishing this goal
- Who is involved
- What are any requirements or constraints associated with this goal?

### **Measureable: (Meaningful)**

- What is the level of expected improvement
- How will I know when I accomplish the goal?

### **Attainable: (Action-Oriented)**

- How can the goal be accomplished
- Is the goal within reach and not below standard performance?

### **Relevant: (Rewarding)**

- Does this goal seem worthwhile
- Is this the right time to be pursuing this goal
- Does this match our needs
- Are you the right person to complete this goal?

### **Time Sensitive: (Trackable)**

- When will the goal be accomplished?
- What can I do 6 months, 6 weeks, or today to accomplish the goal?

### **Effective goals need to meet the following criteria:**

- Flows from the top down and is aligned with the organization's goals
- Is participative by the employee and the manager
- Is documented and readily available for review
- Monitored and progress is acknowledged

### Key Considerations for Effective Goal Setting when planning your goal-setting

- Goals are not tasks. Make them results-oriented – what is intended to be accomplished
- Goal definitions, targets and scope should reflect the nature of the work – they do not need to be highly detailed and specific
- Goal Authorship – Writing your own goals improves the level of commitment. A collaborative approach is best to create a balance between employee commitment and alignment
- Focus on the “critical few” goals based on role – allow employee to focus on fewer goals than a long list to ensure that the goals are meaningful and relevant and allows the employee to maintain focus
- Support goal setting with coach and ongoing feedback – Goals must be discussed regularly to measure the goals and determine if the goal is still relevant.

### Further Tips for Setting Your Goals

The following broad guidelines will help you to set effective, achievable goals:

- **State each goal as a positive statement** – Express your goals positively – "Execute this technique well" is a much better goal than "Don't make this stupid mistake."
- **Be precise:** Set precise goals, putting in dates, times and amounts so that you can measure achievement. If you do this, you'll know exactly when you have achieved the goal, and can take complete satisfaction from having achieved it.
- **Set priorities** – When you have several goals, give each a priority. This helps you to avoid feeling overwhelmed by having too many goals, and helps to direct your attention to the most important ones.
- **Write goals down** – This crystallizes them and gives them more force.
- **Keep operational goals small** – Keep the low-level goals that you're working towards small and achievable. If a goal is too large, then it can seem that you are not making progress towards it. Keeping goals small and incremental gives more opportunities for reward.
- **Set performance goals, not outcome goals** – You should take care to set goals over which you have as much control as possible. It can be quite dispiriting to fail to achieve a personal goal for reasons beyond your control!
- **Set realistic goals** – It's important to set goals that you can achieve. All sorts of people (for example, employers, parents, media, or society) can set unrealistic goals for you. They will often do this in ignorance of your own desires and ambitions.

It's also possible to set goals that are too difficult because you might not appreciate either the obstacles in the way, or understand quite how much skill you need to develop to achieve a particular level of performance.

### Achieving Goals

When you've achieved a goal, take the time to enjoy the satisfaction of having done so. Absorb the implications of the goal achievement, and observe the progress that you've made towards other goals.

If the goal was a significant one, reward yourself appropriately. All of this helps you build the self-confidence you deserve.

With the experience of having achieved this goal, review the rest of your goal plans:

- If you achieved the goal too easily, make your next goal harder.
- If the goal took a dispiriting length of time to achieve, make the next goal a little easier.
- If you learned something that would lead you to change other goals, do so.
- If you noticed a deficit in your skills despite achieving the goal, decide whether to set goals to fix this.

**Final Note:**

Research shows that what truly increases employee performance and engagement is not annual performance reviews, but the day-to-day communication, feedback and development of employees' talents.

You have an important role to play.