

Preparing for High Achievement

Learning to Set SMART Goals

BY MAUREEN NEIHART



Did you make a New Year's resolution this year? Are you still pursuing that goal now? Probably not. Nationally, the average length of time that people pursue a New Year's resolution is three weeks. That's because most of us have good intentions but plan poorly. As a result, we fail to accomplish what we hoped for. We make resolutions like, "I'm going to get in shape," or "I'm going to lose weight," but we make little progress because the goals we set aren't very SMART.

Goal setting research tells us that goals that bring out the best in people are SMART goals. In other words, they are:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Attainable
- Realistic
- Timely

Most of us know that motivation and performance are affected by goal setting, yet we're surprisingly indifferent about the goals we set. The fifty years of research on goal setting identifies at least three ways that goals affect performance and motivation. First, goals focus attention by directing it toward activities that are relevant to the task and away from activities that are irrelevant. Second, goals influence persistence; more difficult goals tend to increase persistence. Third, goals tend to energize people, increasing effort. High goals tend to lead to higher performance than low goals.

How do we help students improve their goal setting so their performance is enhanced? We do it by communicating SMART goals ourselves and by coaching students to make their personal goals Smarter.

Let's look at an example to illustrate. Many of us have set goals regarding our health, yet the statistics on obesity, type II diabetes, and heart disease indicate that we're not very successful in reaching these goals. We say things like,

- I'm going to exercise more
- I'm going to eat better
- I'm going to eat less
- I'm going to cut back on sweets

These are all good ideas, but they're not SMART. Let's revise our goals to make them Smarter. Take the first one—I'm going to exercise more. This goal is not specific, and it is not measurable. What kind of exercise are we going to do? How much of it will

we do? When are we going to do it? Here are some ways we can make that goal Smarter:

- I'm going to walk three miles briskly, four days a week, after dinner.
- I'm going to use the machines at the gym and keep my heart rate in its target zone for at least thirty minutes, four mornings a week.
- I'm going to join a soccer league with Jim and make 90% of practices and games.

Let's try another one. On your own, make the second goal, "I'm going to eat better," SMARTer.

Were you able to refine the goal to make it more specific and measurable? There are lots of possibilities. Here are some you may have thought of:

- I'm going to eat only one sweet thing a day.
- I'm going to cut back on sweets by eating only two desserts a week.
- I'm going to drink more water by taking a 32 oz container of water to work and drinking it twice before I go home for the day.
- I'm going to limit fast food to twice a week.

To make the most of goal setting, students should know how to set SMART goals and how to use feedback to improve performance on goals. Students need feedback regarding their performance toward specific goals in order to adjust their effort or strategy. Without feedback, they have no way of knowing how they are doing. Also, goals that are not accepted by the learner will probably not influence performance positively and may influence it negatively. And goals are most effective when they're challenging but attainable.

What distinguishes the best teachers, coaches, managers, and leaders? They bring out the best in others. Developing talent in others means helping them to define their goals. Working toward SMART goals is like having the exact address for a destination in a new city. Getting there is easier and you're much more likely to arrive on time.

References:

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