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Incorporate smart goals in the planning process for success

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Consider beginning an out-of-town vacation with the philosophy expressed by Alice in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll. When the Cheshire Cat asked Alice where she wanted to go, she responded by saying, "I don't much care where ... so long as I get somewhere."

Although vacations are often planned in advance with attention paid to the smallest details, we too often apply an approach that is similar to Alice's in our busy, day-to-day business environments. By replacing this haphazard approach with one that is more disciplined, we can increase our success in reaching our desired destinations. Our ability to survive and thrive in today's challenging economic times will be dependent, to a large degree, on our ability to plan, implement, monitor and adjust our business decisions.

SMART goals provide one means of incorporating discipline in the planning process. Application of this approach will enable organizations, departments, teams and individuals to focus on the future and establish goals and accompanying plans that will create a roadmap for success. The acronym SMART spells out criteria for goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-based. Goals that meet these standards will provide greater opportunities for accomplishment than those that are stated in a vague, general or hopeful manner, or, as in Alice's case, not stated at all.

These differences in clarity and potential for achievement can be seen by contrasting the following examples of SMART and "non-SMART" goal statements: reduce emergency response time from an annual average of 20 minutes to 15 minutes by July 31, 2009 (beginning date July 1, 2008) vs. reduce emergency response time.

Defining and Stating a SMART Goal

A specific goal is stated in well-defined, specific terms using concrete action verbs (e.g. increase, establish, reduce) that focus on desired future results and leave no doubt as to what is to be achieved.

A measurable goal statement includes numeric and/or descriptive terms that will enable those involved to verify or know with certainty that the defined results have been accomplished.

An achievable goal is formulated to be within the reach of attainment, while presenting a realistic challenge or a stretch. A "yes" to questions, such as the following, indicates that a goal is achievable. Will

those involved have or be able to obtain skills and abilities required to accomplish this goal? Will the goal be within the control and/or influence of personnel responsible for its attainment? Will necessary tools and other resources be available? Is the goal realistic, considering all other commitments and factors that can impact achievement?

A relevant goal is meaningful and will make a difference if accomplished. Therefore, prior to establishing a goal, time should be spent in examining the overall benefits resulting from its achievement. Relevancy should also focus on whether the goal is in alignment with the strategic direction of the organization, department, team and other work group(s) involved. If it is part of an individual's business or performance plan, it should also be aligned with the essential responsibilities of the job.

A time-based goal is anchored with beginning and ending dates. Prior to committing to these dates, questions that are similar to the following should be developed to determine whether the potential timeframe is realistic and pertinent factors have been considered. Will personnel be available when coordination with others is necessary? What is the timetable for procuring necessary resources? Do other assignments need to be reviewed and priorities adjusted?

Establishing a Plan to Achieve Success

Positive results can best be achieved if adequate time is allocated to the planning phase. Prior to implementation, a written plan should be developed to accompany the goal and further define how it will be accomplished.

In writing the plan, attention should be focused on identifying a number of details that include the person(s) with primary responsibility for implementation, indicators of successful performance and frequency of measurement, required resources (including costs), and specific steps and times to accomplish the stated goal.

The plan should not remain on a shelf during the time period between the initiation and completion of the goal. Instead, it should be reviewed on an ongoing basis for a number of purposes. For example, it can be used to monitor progress at various points prior to completion and to assist in determining whether changes need to be made. It can also serve as a basis for communicating and coordinating progress toward achievement and for celebrating milestones as they are reached.

Once the timetable for the goal has been met, questions should be framed to determine what worked, what should have been done differently, whether the goal produced the anticipated results and benefits, what lessons were learned, and whether the need for the goal was met or whether it should be revised to achieve additional improvements.

Continuing to probe with questions of this nature will provide a means of evaluating the goal's success, capturing what was learned from the experience, and identifying ways to improve in the future.

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