

How to make a dumb objective smart.

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It was time for my Personal Assessment, and this year I was nervous. Peter had just returned from a training course where managers had been drilled on the new staff management system. There was a new form. You filled in all the boxes and added up the scores to work out how competent you were.

Sometimes Peter seemed a bit stroppy after he went on these courses, but this time he had a sort of visionary look about him, like things were going to change around here. Anyway, he had got to the end of this course, so he must have related to it.

This was bound to mean that my old work plan was out of date now. I'd used the same one for 11 years. It explained my job and said what I did pretty well. I hate it when you have to go changing things like this. *They* might decide *they* want me to do something else. Not that I'm paranoid or anything. I just like keeping my head down.

Anyway, I had decided to use my old objective and see if Peter noticed. It said,

“Collaborate with experimental scientists by providing advice on the design, analysis, and interpretation of their experiments.”

Wow, talk about controversial! 16 words and it said all I could think of. I counted them backwards and it was still 16. You couldn't change it, it was just so obvious, like it was divinely inspired, or John Maindonald had written it, or something.

Peter read it, and looked up over the top of his glasses.

“Roger”, he said, “this objective is Diffuse, Unquantifiable, Meaningless and Boring. In short, it is DUMB.”

I was crestfallen, gobsmacked. It was worse than I thought. I knew it was Boring, but the rest, gee, it was pretty bad.

“You need an objective that is Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound. You need a SMART objective. Take this, it explains everything,” he said as he handed me a glossy brochure.

I went back to my room and closed the door. This was the pits. I had to throw away my old “dumb” objective and write a new “smart” objective, just so he could satisfy his new “smart” objective that “none of his staff would have dumb objectives any more”. It wasn't fair. It was just plain dumb.

I got a piece of paper and wrote “Specific”. How could I be “specific”? I just do what I'm asked, and I don't know “specifically” what it's going to be until I am asked. And even then it's pretty fuzzy. If he wanted “specific”, why did he employ a statistician? “on request”, that will have to do.

“Measurable”, that was even worse. I could count the number of people I did work for, or the amount that I did for each of them, but I didn’t know what the numbers would be until it happened. I could add up how much cpu time I used. In fact, I could put the computer into an infinite loop each night, and it would add up quite quickly. But that would be really dumb. I wrote down “all”. It sounded like a measure.

“Attainable”. I started to think I was getting the hang of it. If I’d always done what I’d already written, it must be “attainable”, so there was no need to change anything. After all, if I didn’t promise the moon, I wouldn’t have any crash landings. But the more I thought about it, the more it seemed that if I tried to do something unattainable, I was probably more likely to do something really interesting, or, well, smart. I then realized that I had to put that thought out of my mind, very quickly. There was no need to change anything.

“Results-oriented”. Oriented or orientated? I orientate, you orientate, he, she or it orientates. Orientate, schmorientate! Nothing to change.

“Time-bound”. Tricky again. Because the specific part had been a bit woffly, it made this hard to pin down too. I always tried to get things done when people wanted them, so maybe “as requested”, but that was getting repetitive. I couldn’t say tomorrow, or yesterday, because that was unattainable, and nobody asked for it anyway. Maybe I should just say next PA, or the end of the year. That way it should look as though it’s time-bound.

It was time to put it all together. I wrote

“Collaborate with **all** experimental scientists **on request** by providing advice on the design, analysis, and interpretation of **all** their experiments **to 30 June.**”

I could see I was going to get blown up again, but I couldn’t really think of anything else to put. So I went back to Peter’s room, and gave him my new, “smart-looking” objective.

He pondered it at length, with an inscrutable sort of look on his face, and then he said, “Yes, Roger, that’s smart enough, in fact, it’s real smart.”

He signed the box at the bottom of the fourth page.