

## Article 18 – Get SMART

“Some Mexican Horses Eat Oats” is a mnemonic from schooldays that is forever imprinted on my memory. It stands for the Great Lakes of Canada from West to East – Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie and Ontario. There – that’s not bad after forty years or so!

Mnemonics are great memory hooks and so are some acronyms – like SMART. However, the odd thing about SMART when used to define an objective is that there are different versions of what SMART actually stands for.

I received a flier for a training video the other day where SMART objectives were said to stand for:

**S** specific  
**M** measurable  
**A** agreed  
**R** realistic  
**T** timed

I’m in general agreement with three out of five but take issue with the “A” and the “R”. My version looks like this:

**S** specific  
**M** measurable  
**A** **achievable – at a stretch**  
**R** **result – not an activity**  
**T** timed or **Time related**

I would question whether an objective has to be “agreed” before it meets the criteria of an objective. After all, a personal objective might not be agreed with anyone. If it’s a group objective, then it’s highly desirable that there should be agreement among the group as to what the objective is but that argument is equally applicable to a strategy or any other course of action.

“Realistic” and “Achievable” are pretty much the same thing but I like to add – at a stretch. Objectives that are too easily achieved are not sufficiently challenging.

Substituting “Achievable” for “Agreed” and eliminating “Realistic” frees up my “R” so it can stand for the most critical element of an objective AND distinguish objectives from the thing that they are most often confused with – strategies.

Objectives are results; strategies are activities. Strategies are the means by which objectives are achieved. Yet so many times objectives lack this vital element. Unless objectives are framed to produce a result, the other four criteria will be that much more difficult to satisfy.

“I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth”. This pledge by John F Kennedy at his presidential inauguration in 1961 represents a classic objective that meets all my SMART criteria. He didn’t talk about “exploring space” or even of “going to the moon” because both are activities – not results. He also addressed that last modification that I have made to SMART – that “T” should not stand for “timed” but “time related”. It’s a subtle but important difference. Agreeing that some objective will take two months to achieve is not the same as agreeing to a date by when it will be achieved. With the former definition, there is no start date and who is to say whether the two months are sequential or not? Far better to state that the objective will be achieved by the end of August 2005.

We all know that “making it happen” is the hard part. Getting SMART with your objectives will make them a whole lot easier to achieve.

So remember – SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, a Result – not an activity and Time related. Remember also that some Mexican horses eat oats. It might come in handy when Eddie is asking you whether you want to lock it in for a \$million. Don’t forget where you first heard, though!

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July 2005