OBJECTIVE SETTING

Why set objectives?

Setting objectives is a vital part of the revised SRDS scheme. Objectives provide structure and clarity of expectation for the individual, the manager, the team and department. They provide the link between the purpose of the job role and the individual’s efforts, they also form the basis from which an individual's contribution will be assessed.

“The key challenge.....is to make that clear link between business objectives and what people are doing on a day-to-day basis” Lena Baille, Performance management forum, 2004

Since they are so important in shaping the direction of the work, it pays to look at what objectives do, and methods of forming them.

What do objectives do?

Setting objectives focuses attention and action. Objectives give you something to work towards, and help to direct energy and effort. They stimulate the need to act. Research has found that where staff are involved in setting their own objectives they are more motivated to achieve them (Locke, E A and Latham G.P. Goal setting: a motivational technique that works. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984). They lead naturally into moving from the what to the how.

The difficulties in setting objectives

“Very few individuals possess, innately, the ability to understand themselves and their circumstances, to be able to articulate a clearly defined and structured goal” European Lifelong learning initiative, 1993)

Objectives encapsulate in a few words a wealth of meaning. Formulating them is not easy, and writing them is a skill which involves imagination, creativity, realism, and tenacity in redefining them to meet important criteria such as clarity and specificity.

The following information in this handout presents one method which helps in making the design and agreement of objectives a clearer process.
**How to set objectives the SMART way.**

“A usefully stated objective is useful to the extent that it conveys to others a picture of what the outcome will be like.” Mager, 1975

The SMART framework for setting objectives forces managers to consider the following questions when designing objectives.

**Specific:**

- Does the objective state a defined outcome/ result?
- Is it precise? (avoid ambiguous statements)

Being specific about an outcome leads the identification of what will be achieved.

**Measurable:**

- Can the outcome be quantified – if so, how?
- If the outcome can’t be quantified – what indicators will show that the objective has been achieved?

You will need to take into account, who will be measuring the achievement, when it will be measured and how often. If the objective is going to be measured against an evaluation or assessment carried out by others e.g. student feedback sheet, what is it that they are being asked to measure and how does this match up to the intended outcome.

**Achievable:**

- Is it within the reviewee’s capabilities? (this includes being challenging and offering an opportunity for development?)
- Is it in line with the reviewee’s job summary and expectations?
- Is it set within available resources (time and/or money)?

Objectives need to take into account the resources necessary to achieve them and the external factors which can either support or prevent their achievement. Some objectives are unachievable because they assume actions on the part of others which do not happen, or skills which are not present, or funding which is unreliable. A useful way of considering conditions and their potential impact is to identify them and then ‘sort’ them as follows.

What is in our control?
What do we have influence over?
What do we have to accept (and cannot change)?

Recognising what is possible and what is not possible and why is an important part of defining an acceptable level of contribution against which a reviewee is prepared to be measured against.

**Relevant:**

- Does it link to the objectives and priorities of the team/department/ University?
- Is it appropriate to post?

The job summary and the Departmental priorities/ objectives provide the context for this.
Time-framed:

- Has a date been set for the completion of each objective?
- Identify whether the objectives are short, medium or long-term?
- If long-term objectives are agreed, ensure there is a series of phased dates for review/achievement.

An example using SMART

Objective one:
“To respond to all email enquiries within 3 working days”.

Objective two:
“To respond to all international email enquiries within 2 working days and all non international emails within 4 working days throughout the year.

The former objective, whilst being specific in terms of relating to all email enquiries, and measurable does not specify how it relates to the departments priorities or objectives, and whilst the time frame has been set for responding to individual emails, it does not state when or for how long this standard must be kept for. So, legitimately, an individual could say they had met this objective having only done so over a one day/week/month period.

Objective two on the other hand specifies that it is international email enquiries that are priority emails (probably relating to a departmental objective of recruiting more international students for example), it distinguishes between the performance expected for international and national emails, this increased clarity makes it potentially more achievable. It gives a time frame in which to answer the emails and over a given period of time.

One final point......Quality

One final element that needs to be considered is that of quality or standards. Often objectives identify what needs to be done but not to what level or standard they should be done.
Adding a quality dimension to objectives adds to their specificity and gives the reviewee a level to aim for, and exceed.

Using the example above the objective could be improved further in the following way.

“To respond to all international email enquiries within 2 working days and all non international emails within 4 working days with accurate and relevant information throughout the year.”
Other methods
There are other methods of setting objectives which are not covered in this handout. These methods include:-

PCC: Performance, Criteria, Conditions (Mager, 1975)
What performance is expected under what conditions and what criteria must be reached in achieving it?

CASE: Conditions, actions, standards and evaluation – Rose (2000)
What actions are expected in which conditions and to what standard? How will the actions or performance be evaluated?

Both these methods follow the same pattern as SMART by identifying a series of questions that should be asked of an objective.

Conclusion

Well crafted objectives provide clarity. They are specific about what will be achieved as a result of the work, so that others can see what you are working towards, and so that you can demonstrate achievement, by measuring and reporting on progress. They aid better communication and provide focus for effort over time.

_The most useful objective is the one which allows us to make the largest number of decisions relevant to its’ achievement and measurement_” Mager, R. 1975