



# *The Effective Organization*

*January 2008*

## *Why SMART Goals Don't Work... ...and what to do about it*

It's the start of a new year, and I've already received half a dozen identical articles touting the benefits of SMART goals: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. SMART goals are increasingly seen as the secret to personal and business success. Unfortunately, it's a pretty safe bet that most of these goals will go the way of all New Year's resolutions. Why? Because none of these articles actually tell you how to make SMART goals work. In fact, most people who try the SMART approach for any but small and relatively easy goals find themselves frustrated and disillusioned.

Well-constructed goals are extremely powerful tools for getting things done, increasing concentration and motivation. Successfully completing a well-constructed goal builds self-confidence. Unfortunately, creating a well-constructed SMART goal is not quite so simple as the average article makes it out to be.

To begin with, a specific goal is only useful if it's something you can control. Although this may seem obvious, the fact is that far too many people set goals that appear to be under their control, but really are not. For example, consider the athlete who sets the goal of winning an upcoming tournament: it's specific, it's measurable, it has a time of completion associated with it. Is it achievable? Depending on the athlete's level of skill, very possibly. Relevant? One certainly hopes so. However, the athlete has no control over the difficulty of the competition. He may simply be outplayed by a more skilled opponent.

Furthermore, although the goal is measurable, in that the athlete will know whether or not he accomplishes it, the measurement is not particularly useful. At no time will he know how close he is to accomplishing the goal, where he needs to focus his energies, or what else needs to be accomplished. The athlete is far better served by setting the goal

## *Upcoming Events*

**January 31, 2008** – *Exploiting the Constraints of the Medium -- Applying Lessons From Tabletop vs. Live Roleplaying to Computer Games.* At WPI Interactive Media and Game Development ([www.wpi.edu](http://www.wpi.edu)).

For more information, please visit [www.7stepsahead.com](http://www.7stepsahead.com).

## *Publications*

*Routine Matters* in the Lincoln Journal.

*Start with Good Grapes*, in the Worcester Business Journal.

*The Use of Structured Goal Setting in Simulation Design* in the Journal of Interactive Drama.

of exercising certain key skills in the competition, skills that have a high probability of leading to a victory. Not only will he gain the self-confidence boost of accomplishing his goal, he may just win the tournament. A successful marathon runner, for example, sets a goal of running at a certain pace; they receive constant feedback as they run.

They will know immediately if they are deviating from their plan, instead of waiting until they can't finish the race.

Another problem is that a goal is simply too big. If a goal takes years to accomplish, it can be extremely difficult to maintain motivation. Big, ambitious goals are wonderful, but they need to be carefully structured. It is vital to break them down into subgoals that can be accomplished in a much shorter period of time. The perception of progress is critical to maintaining motivation, whether for an individual or a team. Obtaining a black belt in a martial art is a daunting project for most people, but when it's broken down into a number of lesser belts with clear requirements, it becomes much easier.

Having too many goals is another common problem. Well constructed goals are great, but if you have too many of them at once, they become a distraction.

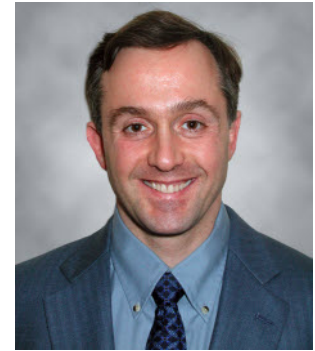
Many people can focus on three to five unrelated goals without a problem, but not ten or twenty. Keeping in mind that each goal might generate numerous subgoals along the way, it's easy to see how having more than a few key goals can easily balloon out of control.

Is the goal something you really care about? Many people have goals that they don't really care about. Perhaps they've been told it's something they ought to do or they believe they should do, but they don't really care about the outcome. If you don't care whether or not you accomplish a goal, it's hard to find the motivation to do it.

Used properly, SMART goals can be a very powerful and effective tool. Well-constructed goals can increase motivation, improve focus, and build self-confidence. Used improperly, they can decrease motivation, and destroy self-confidence.

Good luck!

## *About 7 Steps Ahead*



Stephen R. Balzac is the president of 7 Steps Ahead, a consulting firm specializing in increasing individual, team, and organizational performance.

Steve has over twenty years of experience in the high tech industry and is the former Director of Operations for Silicon Genetics, in Redwood City, CA.

He serves on the boards of the New England Society of Applied Psychology (NESAP) and the Society of Professional Consultants (SPC). Steve is a member of the Operations Committee of the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation. No stranger to the challenges of achieving peak performance under competitive and stressful conditions, he holds a fourth degree black belt in jujitsu and is a former nationally ranked competitive fencer.

Building effective development organizations, improving team morale, focus, and enthusiasm, developing effective communications between team members, reducing employee turnover, helping businesses identify and attain strategic targets, and applying sport psychology techniques to business have been some of his most successful projects.

**If you're thinking continuous improvement, you're thinking...**

