THE PLAYBOOK

The Target

Setting goals a small team will actually hit. What forty years of research says works, why SMART is not the theory, and the three things a goal needs around it to survive contact with a quarter.

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Contents

OPENING

Most goals are wishes with a deadline

Almost every small business sets goals and most of them do not survive the second month. The usual diagnosis is discipline. It is almost never discipline.

Goal setting is one of the better-evidenced areas in workplace research, which makes it unusual on this site. Edwin Locke and Gary Latham spent roughly four decades on it, across hundreds of studies and something in the order of forty thousand participants in many countries, and the findings are consistent enough to act on.

The headline is simple and slightly uncomfortable. Specific, challenging goals produce better performance than telling people to do their best. Not because people are lazy when asked to do their best, but because "do your best" has no definition of enough, so effort settles wherever it settles.

The complication is that this only holds when three other things are true, and most goals in small businesses fail on those three rather than on the goal itself. That is what most of this playbook is about.

A NOTE ON SMART

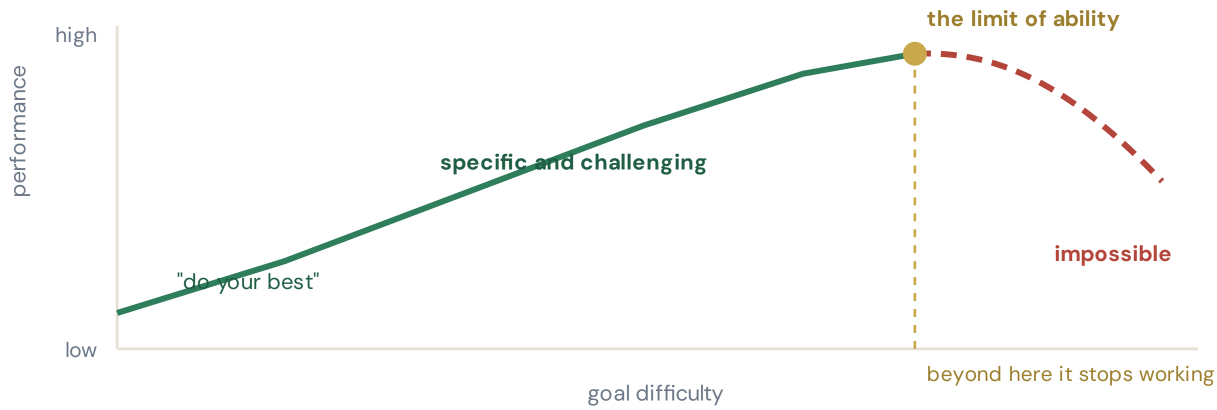
SMART is a checklist for how a goal is written. It is not the research and it does not contain the parts that matter most, which are commitment, feedback and whether the person can actually influence the number. A perfectly SMART goal can still be a wish.

CHAPTER 1

What the research actually found

Four findings, stated as precisely as I can.

GOAL DIFFICULTY AGAINST PERFORMANCE



Locke and Latham, four decades of studies. Harder goals produce better performance, up to the point where ability or com

Figure: the relationship is close to linear until it is not. Both ends of this curve are where most goal-setting goes wrong.

Specific beats vague. A named number outperforms an instruction to improve.

Harder beats easier, up to a limit. Performance rises with difficulty roughly linearly, until ability or commitment gives out. Past that point it collapses, and it collapses faster than it climbed.

Commitment is a condition, not a bonus. A difficult goal somebody has not accepted produces worse results than an easy one they have. This is why goals handed down without a conversation reliably underperform.

Feedback is required, not optional. A specific goal with no visibility of progress is functionally the same as no goal, because nobody can tell whether to change anything.

CHAPTER 2

Specific and hard, not smart

What specific actually means, in practice, is narrower than most goal templates suggest.

ONE GOAL, TAKEN APART

the thing being moved

from and to, both stated

Cut **days to collect** from **44 to 31** by **31 March**

a date, not a quarter

Compare: **improve our collections process** · nothing to aim at, nothing to check

Figure: a goal needs a measure, a start, a target and a date. Three of the four are usually missing.

Four components, and in most small businesses three are missing.

The measure. The actual thing being moved, named in a way that somebody could look up. Not "collections" but "days to collect".

The starting point. Almost universally omitted, and it is the one that makes a goal honest. Without it, nobody can tell whether the target is ambitious or already true.

The target. A number, not a direction.

The date. A day, not a quarter, because a quarter means the last week of the quarter and everybody knows it.

On difficulty: the useful question is not whether the goal is realistic. It is **whether the person believes it is possible.** A goal they privately think is impossible produces disengagement rather than effort, which is the collapse on the right of that curve.

CHAPTER 3

The three things a goal needs around it

The goal is the easy part. These three are where they fail.

01 Commitment, which means a conversation

Not agreement extracted in a meeting. Ask what would have to be true for this to be achievable, and listen to the answer. A goal somebody negotiated is a goal somebody owns. One they were handed is a target they will explain away.

02 Feedback they can see without asking

The number, visible, on a rhythm. If checking progress requires asking somebody, it will be checked at the end. This is why the goal sheet and the weekly ledger belong together.

03 Actual influence over the number

The most common failure in small businesses. A goal on a number somebody cannot move is not a goal, it is a source of resentment. Ask them directly: what part of this can you actually change?

> **If they cannot move it, cannot see it, or did not agree to it, the specificity of the goal is irrelevant.**

Task complexity is the fourth moderator in the research and it matters here too. On complicated work, a hard outcome goal early can hurt, because attention goes to the number before anybody knows how to move it. On genuinely new work, set a learning goal first: find out what drives this, then set the outcome goal.

CHAPTER 4

Team goals that do not become individual targets

A small team usually needs shared goals rather than individual ones, and the translation is where things go wrong.

Keep the outcome shared and the contributions specific. The team goal is days to collect from 44 to 31. One person owns invoicing within two days of delivery, another owns the reminder ladder, another owns the exception queue. Same outcome, distinct and checkable contributions.

Do not split a number four ways. Giving each person a quarter of the target produces four people optimising a fraction and nobody owning the whole, and it is the origin of most goal-related friction in small teams.

Watch for the goal that quietly damages something else. This is the well-documented risk with specific targets: attention narrows onto the measured thing. A collections goal pursued hard enough will damage a client relationship. Name the thing you are not willing to trade, in writing, next to the goal.

THE GUARDRAIL LINE

Every goal on the sheet has a line underneath it reading "not at the expense of". Fill it in at the same time as the target, not after somebody has done something you did not intend.

CHAPTER 5

How often to look at it

Goals fail quietly between the setting and the deadline. The interval is the whole design.

Weekly for the leading number, if there is one. Not the outcome, which moves too slowly to be motivating, but the thing that drives it. Invoices raised within two days is weekly. Days to collect is not.

Monthly for the outcome. Enough movement to be informative, often enough to change course while changing course is still possible.

Never only at the end. A goal reviewed at the deadline is a scoring exercise. Whatever was going to happen has happened.

And revise openly rather than quietly. If a goal has become impossible for reasons nobody could have predicted, change it and say why. The alternative, which is what usually occurs, is that everybody stops mentioning it and the next round of goals is taken less seriously.

A goal that was abandoned without being discussed teaches more than a goal that was missed. It teaches that goals here are decorative.

CHAPTER 6

When a goal is the wrong tool

Four situations where setting a target makes things worse, and they are common.

Nobody knows how to move the number yet. Set a learning goal instead: find out what drives this by a date. Outcome goals on unfamiliar work push people to guess.

The work is genuinely unpredictable. Some months are reactive by nature. A goal set against an unpredictable baseline is a coin toss that will be judged as performance.

The measure is easy to game. If somebody can hit the number without producing the outcome, they eventually will, and it will not feel like cheating to them. Choose a different measure rather than adding rules.

The real problem is a process, not an effort level. If three people miss the same target, the target is not the issue. This is the same diagnostic that applies to feedback: could a capable, willing person have hit this with what they had?

In all four cases, the honest move is to say the goal is not the right instrument here and to name what you will do instead. Setting one anyway, because goals are what one does, is how a business ends up with a page of targets nobody references.

CHAPTER 7

Rewriting five real goals

The exercise I would run first, and it takes an hour.

Take the five goals your business currently has. For each, fill in the four components and the three conditions. Most will fail on at least two, and the pattern will be consistent.

01 **"Improve client satisfaction"**

No measure, no start, no target, no date. Rewrite: raise the share of projects with a completed post-delivery response from 15 percent to 60 percent by 30 June.

02 **"Grow revenue by 20 percent"**

Specific, and usually fails the influence test for everybody except the owner. Rewrite it as the thing the team can actually move, and keep revenue as the reason rather than the goal.

03 **"Be more organised"**

Not a goal. Underneath it is usually a specific recurring failure. Find that, measure it, and set the target on it.

Then cut the list. **Three goals a quarter for a small team is a lot.** Five is a list. Ten is a document that will be quietly abandoned by week six, and abandoning it will cost you more credibility than never setting it.

CLOSING

Specific, hard, and looked at

The research here is unusually clear and unusually easy to apply. Specific beats vague. Harder beats easier, until it becomes impossible, at which point it collapses. And none of it works without commitment, visible feedback, and genuine influence over the number.

Most goals in small businesses fail on those last three rather than on how they were written, which is why SMART templates produce SMART goals that nobody hits.

Three goals a quarter. Each with a measure, a starting point, a target, a date, and a line saying what you are not willing to trade for it. A weekly look at the leading number, a monthly look at the outcome, and an open conversation when one becomes impossible.

The sheet overleaf holds three. That is deliberate.

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Goal setting sheet

Three per quarter, no more · v1

Component	Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 3
The measure the thing being moved			
Starting point what it is today			
Target a number, not a direction			
By when a day, not a quarter			
Who owns it			
Leading number checked weekly			
Not at the expense of fill this in now, not later			

Three conditions, check each before you commit. Did they agree to it after a conversation, rather than receive it? Can they see progress without asking anyone? Can they actually move this number?

If the answer to any of the three conditions is no, fix that before improving how the goal is worded. A perfectly written goal fails all the same.