

Setting “SMART” Goals and Brainstorming an Action Plan

This document explains the process of creating “SMART” goals and how to develop an action plan for a selected goal. You might find it helpful to print out “A sample goal and action plan” to see the steps in action, or examine it later.

“SMART” is an acronym for the characteristics of practical, achievable goals that will help you reach your dreams. Although the individual terms can differ, the general criteria are explained below:

- S Goals are **Specific**, focused and clear.
 - What will you do? How will you do it?
 - Why is it important to do now?
 - State goals in as much detail as possible.
 - State goals in a positive way “I want XXX” is more effective than “I don’t want XXXX.”

- M Goals have **Measurable** outcomes.
 - “If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it.”
 - Establish (or borrow) criteria to measure progress.
 - Determining progress helps maintain progress.

- A Goals are **Accepted/Agreed** to as your own, not just what others want for you.
 - A career goal needs to suit you, not an image of you others may have.
 - You have to really want the goal to do all the work.
 - Goals should be consistent with what you value and believe.
 - Goals should not be in conflict or be inconsistent with each other.

- R Goals are **Realistic/Reachable** and meaningful for this point in your life.
 - Reachable goals will stretch you without crippling or terrifying you.
 - Attaining the goal should be satisfying in itself.
 - Satisfaction is motivation for the next round of goals.
 - Big goals should be subdivided into goals of more manageable size.

- T Goals are **Time-sensitive with a Time-frame** for completion.
 - Goals are for making progress now, not for “someday”.
 - A time-frame helps you create meaningful objective steps/tasks.
 - Appropriate time pressure helps you keep motivated.

The Action Plan

Focused “SMART” goals are a great start, but to put them in motion, you’ll need a plan. You can use the “Developing an action plan” form for the next steps, or use a form of your own design. What matters is that you determine objectives, anticipate challenges, brainstorm solutions and evaluate those solutions to determine the best path. Once these steps are completed, you should have a step by step plan to guide your actions and support your effort.

Determine Objectives

Objectives are the steps to help you meet your goals; they are what you have to do. In size, they are larger than the items on a “To Do” list, but you could write a daily “To do” list off of your objectives. While you may be able to think of many of the steps yourself, you can ask for help in coming up with the list. Use the Internet and career sites for education/career tasks. You might want to ask around in a general way or “for a

friend” to avoid ‘dream stompers’ who are often frustrated dreamers themselves. It will feel great as the list of practical steps grows!

Anticipate Challenges

This part is a little scary. For each objective, you have to anticipate potential challenges (what would make the objective hard to complete). Identify the kind of internal resistance you raise against “doing what’s good for you” as well as any external factors that may come into play. List as many as you can, but go on to the next step before you get discouraged.

Brainstorm Possible Solutions

For each challenge, brainstorm as many ways to overcome it as possible. This can get a little silly if you get off track, so try to keep focused. For a challenge like “I could be overwhelmed by the work” some solutions could be “I’ll join a study group” or “I’ll get a tutor” or “I’ll see a counselor” or “I’ll divide the work into smaller pieces and set myself a schedule for getting it done on time.” You could add “I’ll get everything done two weeks early” and “I’ll drop the course” or “I’ll take a very long spring break in Switzerland.” Next comes evaluation, where you do a little weeding.

Evaluate Possible Solutions

Evaluation means determining which solutions have merit, and which one(s) has the best chance of working. You’ll be surprised to see how many ways you can come up with to overcome potential challenges. The trick is to use your tactics at the appropriate time, before you feel overwhelmed by the original challenge. That’s one secret to the power of an action plan. “When the going gets tough, the tough get going” but only if they have tactics like you just developed.

Chances are good that knowing you have a bunch of solutions is already a motivating force! You’ll want to keep the plan handy for reference, and spruce it up as you go along.

Clean Up

You can convert your thinking into a neat plan with options, or just keep the crazy mess you generated as it is and use a highlighter on the critical parts. It’s up to you!

Let’s Get Started

So set aside some time, select a goal, and try out this new skill. See the “Sample” for an example!