

Selecting and shaping key goals

Does the thought of condensing your work life to a short list of compelling goals seem overwhelming? It should! Setting goals isn't easy. It requires figuring out what really matters, making tough choices about priorities, and diving into deep thought and analysis. The steps below will help you get started.



"I'm not sure you understand what I mean by career goals."

1. Brainstorm possible goals.

We recommend that you ultimately target 3-5 long-term goals, balanced with some shorter-term tactical goals (see Step 8). But you shouldn't expect to be able to generate this list off the top of your head. Start by brainstorming.

Set aside at least 30 uninterrupted minutes to consider what your manager needs, what your organization needs, what you enjoy, what your strengths are, and what you'd like to accomplish in your career. Write everything and anything down without worrying about how you word things, how small or large the goals are, or how many items you come up with. The following questions will help get the ideas flowing:

- What are your organization's top priorities? What are your team's top priorities?
- What are your manager's top priorities? How could your role support those priorities?
- How do you measure success?
- What are your personal and work/life balance goals?
- What is exceptional performance for your role? What do you enjoy?
- What are your strengths?
- What would you like to accomplish in your career three months from now, one year from now, five years from now?

Set your list aside and sleep on it. Add anything else that comes to mind the next morning.

2. Find out what your manager's goals are.

It's important for you to understand what your manager would like you to do. After all, at the end of the day, if your manager isn't happy with your work, your chances of success at the organization are slim. Furthermore, your manager will probably have a bigger-picture view of your organization and team, and may have managed others in the role that you are currently in, or been in it themselves.

This discussion with your manager is a crucial one, as it is also an opportunity for you to potentially influence your manager's expectations of you and how they will evaluate you. Prepare thoroughly, and approach the meeting with great care. Take extensive notes, listen more than you talk, and follow up if anything is unclear. For more tips, see our [Managing Up and Across](#) topic.

Here are a few questions you can ask to guide the conversation:

- What is the purpose of my role?
- If I could only focus on three things in the next year, which should they be?
- How will you evaluate my performance?
- What does exceptional performance look like to you?
- What are your goals for the team, and how do they fit into the broader context of our company's goals?

3. Get suggestions from others who know your role.

Try to find others in your organization or network who have been (or are) in a similar role. Ask them what their top priorities were (or are), and why. Ask them what they'd suggest for you. Don't forget to collect any new ideas on your list.

4. Go back to your list and eliminate any unimportant goals.

At this point, you probably have a long and wide-ranging list of potential goals—everything from organizing your workspace to getting promoted. Go through each item and ask yourself if and why it truly matters. What’s in it for you? Your manager? Your teammates? Your company? What will happen if you reach the goal? What will happen if you don’t? Cross off any items that you can’t come up with a good reason for doing.

Tip: At first sight, the ones that are left might all seem important. Get past this by comparing two goals and asking what the world would be like if each were achieved, or not achieved. The answers will often reveal the more important goal.

5. Categorize the goals that are left and decide if you want to focus on certain types (or not).

You’ll learn a lot about how you think and what motivates you by going through your remaining goals with an eye for patterns. How would you categorize the different goal types on your list? While it doesn’t necessarily matter whether you have different types of goals on your list, some experts recommend seeking a balance. Here are some basic categories that professional goals tend to fall into:

- Performance goals: outcome-oriented goals, such as reaching a sales target, launching a new product, or completing a report.
- Skills-based goals: goals focused on improving your professional skill set, such as learning Rails, becoming a better presenter, or brushing up on Excel.
- Behavioral goals: goals designed to change or enhance a behavior, such as getting to work a half-hour earlier each morning, cultivating a more positive attitude, or speaking up more frequently in meetings.

6. Factor in your life outside work.

Think about how your professional goals will affect your personal life. Let’s say that you would love to move into a more demanding leadership role, but also want to train for a marathon and adopt a child. Depending on who you are and how you operate, you might have to make some tough choices. If you see potential work/life balance conflicts, you may need to scale some of your professional goals back or eliminate them from your list.

7. Zero in on goals that are ambitious, yet realistic.

Look through your goals and ask yourself if they reflect what you expect to be able to achieve (i.e., what is easy to predict and will likely be something you end up doing for your job regardless of your goals), or what you *hope* to achieve (i.e., what stretches you to reach your potential, without heading into the realm of the impossible). Eliminate any that seem too predictable and safe, or, conversely, completely unrealistic.

8. Narrow your list to 3-5 long-term goals, balanced with some shorter-term tactical goals.

Many experts recommend setting a few (three to five) big, long-term goals and balancing those with shorter-term, more tactical goals that reflect weekly or even daily goals (and ideally, some or all of these small goals will feed into your big goals).

As [James Burgess](#) told us, “It is best to have both. Long-term goals give you direction and a stable path of growth and effort that will build on itself. Short-term goals give you the benefit of making progress and ‘checking off’ items from your list, which can be highly motivating.”

Experienced manager [Grayson Morris](#) explains how he brought order to the chaos of a new role by focusing on his top three goals.

9. Shape the remaining goals on your list into SMART* goals.

Do the goals you’ve chosen meet the five criteria? If not, that might be OK—for example, just because you can’t objectively measure a goal doesn’t mean it’s worthless. But generally, it helps to try to hit on some or all of these elements:

- **Specific:** Is what you want to accomplish crystal clear? Vague and fuzzy goals are tough to follow through on.
- **Measurable:** How will you track your progress? If you can’t track it, it will be harder to know if you’ve achieved it.
- **Attainable:** It’s good to be ambitious and positive, but, ask yourself: Can you really do it?
- **Relevant:** What matters most to you, your team, and the company? Why mess around with anything else?
- **Time-bound:** How much time do you need to achieve the goal? How long did it take you or others to achieve something similar?

Original goal: Clean out my inbox.

SMART goal: By July 15, devise and implement a system that ensures I have no more than 10 emails in my inbox by the end of each work week (i.e., by 6 p.m. every Friday).

Experienced manager [Grayson Morris](#) explains how creating specific, measurable goals helped his team members understand what they should—and shouldn't—be doing.

10. Get buy-in from your manager and colleagues.

Validate your goal choices with your manager, as well as any colleagues you'll be working with during the follow-through phase. If you encounter resistance, or someone brings up something that didn't occur to you, refine your goals until you have a final set that everyone feels good about.

If you're a manager, you may want to get feedback from your direct reports, too. Involving them in the process will build their awareness of what your goals are and help them understand why you do what you do. It will also help them set their individual goals.

Next: [How to create an action plan for each goal](#)

*George T. Doran first presented the SMART goal model in a 1981 paper for *Management Review* called "There's a S.M.A.R.T. Way to Write Management's Goals and Objectives." In his version, the A stands for "assignable" and the R stands for "realistic." Since then, multiple variations have emerged. The one here is closest to author Paul J. Meyer's in *Attitude Is Everything!*, although he uses "achievable" instead of "attainable."