Preparing Program Objectives in Business and Government

Preparing program objectives for the business and government enterprise is probably a standard operating procedure in almost all departments. Professionals most assuredly completed university courses, professional development workshops, or in-service training experiences on this essential topic. For many, this task is almost second nature. The purpose of this article is to be a reminder or perhaps a refresher on the basics of writing clear and meaningful program objectives.

What are Program Objectives?
An objective is a written statement that details the measurable change that is expected from participants (employees, customers, citizens, vendors, etc.) as they engage in the activities of the program. Within program objectives are certain key words that state in specific and concise ways: who will make what change, by how much, where and by when. Program objectives should be ambitions but realistic, after all they need to be achieved and the objective constitutes the accountability of the program.

How Do You Prepare Objectives?
There are a number of approaches to preparing meaningful program objectives. The SMART process is a currently used method that has proven helpful in many settings including business and government. Each of the letters stands for a specific aspect of a clearly written and measurable objective. Sometimes there are slight differences to the words selected to describe this method.

For some the words: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time specific are used. Others select similar concepts but slightly different words such as: specific,
meaningful, assigned, realistic, and timed. Either way this model gives helpful structure to the program objective preparation process.

**Specific** - The first aspect of the program objective is that specific language is used rather than general terms. In addition, the wording is set up so that specific changes are identified. A program objective that is too general might be worded this way: “The department’s sales program will help employees with profitability.” Certainly sales and profitability are connected but a more specific set of terms would be helpful.

Adding language such as … increases by a certain amount and a specific time frame allows the objective to be more meaningful.

**Measurable** - The second element to include in a program objective is to specify the degree or quantity of change and by how much. To state something like, “to raise awareness of low computer skills,” is important but the needed dimensions of by how much is missing. Something such as the following adds the measurement component, “within six weeks of participation in the company’s computer course, employees will increase their access skills, word processing tools and search abilities by fifty percent from their start skills.” What is changed and by how much is now known. The measurable element of a program objective forces visibility and accountability.

**Achievable** - Depending on the SMART framework, this term may be called assigned and the term relevant might be referred to as realistic. The essence of program objectives being achievable is the same as being realistic. Objectives are to be lofty, worthwhile and meaningful, but they must also be based on reality and what in fact can be accomplished within reason. To create objectives that will lead to false hope, discouragement and high failure is not helpful. The activity should improve and enhance ones condition but not be stated in such away that it is not attainable.

**Relevant** - Of course program objectives need to have meaning to the participants and have a close connection to the mission of the company or government agency. Program objectives are building blocks of the program structure and as a consequence need to
be relevant to all concerned. Also the more relevant the objective to the users of the program there will be more interest and attraction to the program. To help make the objectives relevant such considerations as the value of time, effort, importance of the skill, mission appropriateness, popularity of activity and other similar dimensions should be considered.

**Time Specific** - The process of building program objectives that are time specific helps to make the objective concrete, specific and realistic. The time frame puts limits or targets on how long an activity is engaged to ensure success. The selection of the time line is of course a concept that needs to be thought out in advance and helps to bring structure to the program. Terms such as: by the end of the program, or at the third week, or after 150 minutes, are the types of phrases that speak to the time sensitivity issue.

**Conclusion**
Preparing program objectives is a common practice in the business and government profession. Government departments and business enterprises must structure their work by statements of program objectives. There are key words that are helpful to the language of a program objective such as: who, what, how much, where, and when. A popular and useful method of preparing objectives is the specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time specific model.