

Goals, Subgoals, Objectives, Activities: What's the Difference?

The conceptual boundaries among goals, subgoals, objectives, and activities are often vague: An objective in one project might be a subgoal in another, for example. The following is intended as a rough guide to understanding, not a set of hard-and-fast rules.

Goal

Definition: A major aspiration that the organization intends to realize under a given Strategic Direction.

Characteristics of a Sound Goal

- Reflects the Big Picture
- Clearly serves the interests of the organization as a whole
- Ambitious—even audacious!—yet attainable in principle
- Achievement of the Goal represents significant progress in the applicable Strategic Direction.
- Relatively long-range and stable over time, until it is achieved

Example: Meet the needs of individual learners.

Subgoal

Definition: A Goal component or element that is ambitious, complex, or difficult enough to warrant its own set of objectives.

Characteristics of a Sound Subgoal

- Reflects a substantial piece of the Big Picture
- Ambitious—even audacious!—yet attainable in principle
- Achievement of the Subgoal represents significant progress toward achievement of the applicable Goal.
- Relatively long-range and stable over time, but less so than a Goal

Example: Eliminate the achievement gap across student subgroups at all levels.

Objective

Definition: A concrete, measurable outcome that represents a milestone on the way to achieving a Goal or Subgoal.

Characteristics of a Sound Objective

- Relevant and significant with respect to the applicable Goal or Subgoal
- Brings the Goal or Subgoal down to earth in clear language
- Shows the specific person with overall responsibility for ensuring that progress on the objective occurs as planned
- Achievement of the objective represents significant progress toward achievement of that Goal or Subgoal.
- Achievement of all the objectives related to a Goal or Subgoal does not necessarily mean achievement of that Goal or Subgoal; it often represents completion of one phase of work that will continue with the formulation of additional objectives and action plans.
- Specific
- Measurable
- Reasonable
 - Scope
 - Timeline
- Lends itself to formulation of a coherent set of activities or actions

Example: Provide mentors for at-risk students.

Activity or Action

Definition: One of a coherent set of specific steps that must be taken to reach the objective.

Characteristics of a Sound Activity or Action

- Specific
- Reasonable
 - Scope
 - Timeline
 - Workloads
- Shows the specific person with overall responsibility for ensuring that the activity occurs as planned
- Considers all the significant resources required for execution
- Considers potential sources of support for those resources
- Completion of all the activities under an objective means achievement of that objective.

Example: Identify students for the Mentoring Program through self- and staff referrals.