

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

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The conceptual boundaries among goals, objectives, and activities are often vague: An objective in one project or department might be an activity 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, often under a given Strategic Direction or higher-level Goal.

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
 - A BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal) can be very useful if formulated well.
- Achievement of the Goal represents a major improvement in the functioning of the organization, and/or significant progress in the applicable Strategic Direction.
- Relatively long-range and stable over time, until it is achieved

Example: Maximize the scope, utility, and accuracy of all our communications with clients.

Objective

Definition: A concrete, measurable milestone on the way to achieving a Goal.

Characteristics of a Sound Objective

- Relevant and significant with respect to the applicable Goal
- Brings the Goal 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.
- Achievement of all the objectives related to a Goal does not necessarily mean achievement of that Goal; 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
- Considers the significant additional resources required for execution, if any
- May consider potential sources of support for those resources
- Lends itself to formulation of a coherent set of activities or actions

Example: Redesign the departmental website.

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
- May show the specific person with overall responsibility for ensuring that the activity occurs as planned
- Completion of all the activities under an objective means achievement of that objective.

Examples: Research websites of corresponding departments at similar institutions.

Identify model practices on those websites that would fit our needs.

In consultation with the webmaster, build those practices into the redesign.

Execute and test the redesign.

Implement the redesigned website.

Evaluate the effectiveness of the redesigned website and make improvements as needed.

*For information on the distinction between objectives and outcomes, see *Observations on Essential Outcomes for a Service or Administrative Unit*, March 2010.