



Guiding CQI with SMART goals

Improvement goals, often referred to as SMART goals, are useful for guiding CQI efforts. After your CQI implementation team identifies and defines a challenge, it should next create a SMART goal that answers the question, what are we trying to accomplish? SMART goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. A well-developed SMART goal will provide a gauge of success over time and help to foster clarity about the aims of the improvement effort.

Below are a few common questions about SMART goals and measures to understand progress toward meeting them.

What is a SMART goal?

A SMART goal defines what success looks like for your improvement effort. When your CQI team identifies a challenge, a key next step is to develop a SMART goal before starting to brainstorm and test strategies. Being clear about what you are trying to accomplish makes it easier to determine how to get there. In the [HMRF CQI template](#), use **Table D1** to specify your SMART goal and the measures you will use to assess progress toward your goal.

Why create SMART goals?

SMART goals serve a couple of purposes.

1. SMART goals provide **a means for assessing the success** of your team's improvement efforts. In developing a SMART goal, your team will specify by how much you are aiming to improve related to your challenge. At various points during the improvement effort, your team should track progress toward your SMART goal to understand whether you are moving in the right direction.
2. SMART goals should also **inspire and motivate** the team to achieve improvement and should help to **get everyone on the same page** about what the team is trying to accomplish.

To serve both purposes, a SMART goal should strike a balance between being practical and inspirational.

What makes an effective SMART goal?

As noted above, effective SMART goals are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound. Below, we break down what each of those terms means in the context of improvement work.

Box 1. Program B's experiences developing improvement strategies prior to setting a quantifiable goal

Program B's CQI team has identified exit survey response rates as a challenge and sets a goal to improve response rates. With approval from their FPS, the team decides to pilot a strategy to offer incentives for survey completion. They pilot in two groups and achieve 66% and 68% response rates. They look back and see this was up from an average of 62%.

Was the strategy a success? The pilot groups had higher response rates, but the team never defined what success meant, so is not sure whether the slight bump was the improvement they were looking for or if further work needs to be done.

Specific. A SMART goal is clear about *for whom*. What specific population is experiencing the problem? It should also state the extent of the problem, as well as where/when it presents itself.

Measurable. To provide a gauge of success, a SMART goal must be quantifiable. For example, rather than saying, “We will increase referrals,” try, “We will increase referrals by 20%.” Your team should also identify a metric that can be tracked over time, as you will use the measure to understand progress toward your goal over the long term. For more considerations about measurement, see the section, How should I measure progress toward a goal?

Attainable. The goal needs to be something that can be accomplished in the timeframe that your team sets. A lofty goal may be inspirational, but if the goal isn’t achievable, it may have the opposite effect of discouraging rather than motivating the team.

Relevant. A goal should feel meaningful to the CQI team, as well as to program leadership and staff. Is it aligned with the mission of the program? Is there momentum related to the goal?

Time-bound. A goal should specify by when the team expects to see improvement. Specifying *by when* will help your team to determine if you are on track toward meeting your goal. If you are just setting out on a new challenge, consider setting a short-term SMART goal to promote early wins. If you’re addressing a consistent, complex challenge (such as engagement or retention), consider setting a longer-term goal to allow your team time to test multiple strategies and examine progress over time.

You can use the template presented in Box 3 to ensure you’re including the essential elements of a SMART goal.

Box 2. Program B – Developing a more specific goal

The CQI team sets a quantifiable goal to assess their improvement efforts, but they’re struggling to make it specific.

Original goal: *We will increase the exit survey completion rate by 10% by Q2.*

How could it be more specific? The goal should specify for whom. The team examines nFORM data and notes they have good exit survey response rates at Site A (85% completed), mediocre rates at Site B (60%) and poor rates at Site C (42%). Now they understand they need to focus improvement efforts on Site C (and they have an opportunity to probe on what’s working at Site A!).

New goal: *We will increase exit survey response rates at Site C from 42% to 60% by Q2.*

Box 3. Need help getting started?

Ensure that your improvement goal touches on not just what you want to improve (the outcome), but also by how much (baseline to goal)? By when (timeframe)? For whom (population)? Use the template below to ensure your goal includes all the essential elements:

Our goal is to:

Increase/decrease:	_____	(outcome)
From:	_____	(baseline)
To:	_____	(goal)
By:	_____	(date, timeframe)
For/In:	_____	(population/program component)

Remember to check with key partners to ensure the goal is relevant and attainable!

Adapted from Institute for Healthcare Improvement

How should I measure progress toward a goal?

Improvement work involves two different types of measures: 1) Measures to support road testing of improvement strategies, and 2) Measures to track progress toward your SMART goal. Road test measures help you to understand implementation of strategies (e.g., how many attendance incentives were provided) and early promise (e.g., did students report that attendance incentives were motivating?). SMART goal measures help your team to understand progress on your improvement aims or outcomes (e.g., does attendance appear to be consistently higher since implementing our improvement efforts?). Measures to track progress toward your SMART goal need to be quantifiable, objective, and feasible to collect at regular intervals. When assessing whether you have identified a good measure, consider:

- **Is it feasible to track regularly over time?** Do you have an existing data source, or do you need to collect new data? If new, can the additional tracking be feasibly integrated into someone's job responsibilities?
 - Not feasible: Interviews of facilitators conducted at regular intervals. Though you can collect quantifiable data via an interview, this would be very labor intensive.
 - Feasible: Track participation metrics during sessions to understand the number of clients who speak or contribute in another way. Facilitators could use a client roster to check off who actively participated during each session, which is a relatively simple data collection effort.
- **Is it an appropriate measure of success?** Is it quantifiable and objective? While valuable to gauge satisfaction with your program, try to avoid feedback-type questions to track progress toward your

Box 4. Program B – Identifying a data source

Program B is challenged by low survey response rates. To measure progress toward their SMART goal, they can use nFORM operational reports to pull survey response rates by location. They determine they will pull exit survey response rates for Site C (the focus of their improvement efforts).

Is it feasible? Yes, the data can be easily obtained at regular intervals from nFORM.

Is it appropriate? Yes, survey response rates are a direct measure of the challenge.

The team will monitor their metric every four weeks to understand whether they are seeing consistent improvement over time.

SMART goal, such as “How did you feel about today's session?” While you could feasibly collect this data after every session, responses are subjective and could be influenced by factors that have nothing to do with the quality of that day's sessions. However, your program could opt to collect additional information via post-session surveys/polls that ask fact-based questions – for example, “Did you bring the materials needed for today's session?” Fact-based questions are objective and more reliable measures for your goal.

For how long should I track my goal?

A SMART goal is developed for a specific challenge and serves as a north star to help answer “are we on the right track with our efforts to improve?” Thus, progress toward goals should be continually tracked and monitored over the period that your team set to achieve the goal and beyond if the goal wasn't met. If feasible, consider continuing to track progress even if you achieve your goal, as it is important to ensure *consistent* success over time.

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