INTENTIONAL MOVES

How Skillful Team Leaders IMPACT LEARNING

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WORK TOWARD
A S-M-A-A-H-R-T GOAL

If you've ever set professional goals for yourself, your team, or your school, you are likely familiar with the acronym SMART—used to describe goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, results-driven, and time-bound. The SMART criteria can help you move from a wish to a realized outcome. For example, "I hope to make cum laude" becomes "By the end of the third quarter, I'll raise my GPA by 0.3 point to be cum laude. I won't skip class. I'll join a study group, do all assignments, and go to office hours once a week." SMART goals have become commonplace in schools and can serve a team well. But, as I'm sure you've seen, simply having them does not guarantee impact on student learning. While this can be attributed to poor implementation of a goal, in many cases the problem lies within the written goal itself.

Q2 and Q3 teams (both low impact) tend to write what I call "seemingly SMART" goals. Explained in detail in my first book, *The Skillful Team Leader* (MacDonald, 2013), these are goals that technically meet each criterion of the SMART acronym, but when goals are reached, nothing much has changed for student learning. For instance, a team might set a goal that is seemingly specific in that it specifies what teachers will do (e.g., *We will collect resources for teaching writing in history and English*) but it does not specify the anticipated improved outcomes in student learning (e.g., *Students will differentiate relevant from irrelevant textual evidence to defend a position*). Make no mistake: Sharing teaching practices is worthwhile, but unless teachers identify where learning breaks down and set goals for specific students for whom learning is a struggle, impact is left to chance.

Skillful team leaders (STLs) and their teams don't settle for seemingly SMART goals. Instead, they deliberately aim for small, equitable student-learning targets that align to bigger priorities and goals. They write goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, aligned, heartfelt, results-driven, and time-bound, or S-M-A-A-H-R-T—intended to be pronounced with a Boston accent as a fun homage to my colleagues and to my Revere, MA-raised husband. (Imagine Matt Damon in *Good Will Hunting* telling you to make your goal S-M-A-A-H-R-T!)

Side note: Some schools have stepped back from the infamous SMART acronym for reasons such as misguided enforcement of goals, creating a culture of intimidation, or too heavy a focus on only those goals that can be measured with assessments schools have. You don't need to use the acronym if you think people will adversely react, but you should intentionally engage your team in dialogue about the aspects of goals that can improve your chances of impact.

Other factors influence goal attainment.

There's more to achieving a team goal than ensuring it's written as specific, measurable, attainable, and so on. Research shows that people are more likely to reach their goals when they have a desire to achieve the goal, intent to implement the goal, and the perception that they have control in attaining the goal (Bagozzi et al., 2003). Attention to the language you use to write your team goal, coupled with the belief that you intend to and will achieve the goal, is what gets your team across the finish line. Figure 24 in Move 6.11 can help you get a sense of how invested people are in reaching the goal.

STL moves:

6.7 (Specific) Write specific student-learning targets.

6.8 (Measurable) Measure what matters.

6.9 (Attainable) Reach for a tippy-toe goal.

6.10 (Aligned) Align with priorities and individual goals.

6.11 (Heartfelt) Connect to what matters.

6.12 (Results-driven) Distinguish learning outcomes from pathways.

6.13 (Time-bound) Establish a time frame according to student need.

Tools and templates:

Figure 24: How Committed Is Your Team to Achieving Their Goal?

Figure 25: STL Tool for Setting S-M-A-A-H-R-T Goals

What these moves promote:

Evidence-based analysis. Teams look toward data to determine desired student-learning outcomes.

Accountability. Teams determine measures by which they will evaluate progress.

Alignment. Selected team goals advance school[*] priorities.

Agency. Teams focus on goals that they are deeply committed to achieving and can reach.

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[*]*Note:* School priorities include district, department, and grade-level priorities.

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When to use these moves:

During the *Target & Plan* STL phase of collaborative inquiry.

> # What is a skillful, intentional approach to goal setting with a team?
>
> Before you lead the moves in this section, remember that your approach matters. Be careful not to get so caught up in acronyms or wordsmithing that you forget what goal setting is really about—getting on the same page about where you are headed and why. Skillful team leaders (STLs) use whatever approach works for their team. They think through key considerations of setting a goal using S-M-A-A-H-R-T as a guide, not a straitjacket.
>
> Avoid seemingly SMART goals, those that are technically specific, measurable, attainable, results-driven, and time-bound but won't likely bring about the impact you are seeking. Play with the moves in this section without feeling married to the sequence of the acronym, and pick an approach that doesn't feel cumbersome or forced.

STL recommendations for working toward a S-M-A-A-H-R-T goal:

Use a question guide. If you want to make sure you don't have a seemingly SMART goal, then refer to the checklist in Figure 25 at the end of this chapter. There's no need for your whole team to go through every checkbox together; instead, you can simplify the list by focusing only on the S-M-A-A-H-R-T criteria that you think need to be addressed.

Fill in the blank. There's nothing wrong with using a linguistic frame for SMART goal writing, such as this one: *Evidence [name sources] shows that students [describe current reality]. By [date], students will be able to [expected learning results] as measured by [assessment tool]. This goal aligns with [priorities]. This goal matters to us and students because . . .*

Bullet. If plugging your goal into a linguistic frame or answering questions in a checklist is too much for you or your team, simply bullet the student outcomes you want and the teacher outcomes you expect on your draft plan (see Figures 12–14 in Move 4.1). Then, accompany it with a simple narrative explaining the rationale for the decisions you have made, such as how this goal aligns to priorities and your plans to measure the goal.

Use the moves, but shake up the sequence. As convenient as acronyms are, you don't have to follow the sequence of letters. Start where it makes sense. Usually, the best place is to start by aligning to priorities (*A*). Then, analyze data and name the specific learning outcomes you want to achieve for students (*R*), write the specifics (*S*) of the goal, and check that everyone on your team is strongly committed

to achieving it (*H*). Later, you can ask how students are doing, which will prompt your team to put some progress-monitoring assessments in place for whatever you are assessing (*M*). After you've studied some strategies, you can make a timeline (*T*) for implementation. And, if you were overly ambitious in your initial goal, you can always adjust at any point to make it more attainable (*A*).

Assess readiness. If you're having trouble naming a S-M-A-A-H-R-T goal, it might be because your team isn't ready to do so. Perhaps you don't yet have data that show which students are affected in what ways by a problem, and you first need to assess. Perhaps you don't yet have progress-monitoring tools to tell you how effective your actions are on student outcomes, and you need to take a step back and create them. Or, maybe you are in the initial stages of just trying to name a student-centered challenge that your team wants to pursue, and you need to refine your collaborative inquiry question.

6.7 (Specific) Write specific student-learning targets.

Joan Benoit Samuelson, winner of the first Olympic women's marathon and many running accomplishments thereafter, shares one strategy she uses to reach the finish line in record time: She sets visual targets throughout the race (*get to the street light, pass the person in the red shorts, etc.*). Each goal is something she can literally see (Balcetis, 2020). I have seen this approach applied successfully by teacher team leaders with whom I have worked in extraordinary turnaround schools across the nation. Although they don't necessarily set visual markers, skillful team leaders (STLs) write specific student-learning targets. They specify which students will make what incremental gains, by when and by how much, based on data.

How to write specific student-learning targets:

In the early phases of your team's inquiry cycle, set direction for your team with a specific student-learning goal. Examine state, district, or school assessment data you have. If you need a more narrow view of specific student-learning challenges, use a teacher-created assessment (see Moves 7.1–7.4). Refer to benchmarks that students are expected to reach. Notice specific areas of need for specific groups of students who are not yet at the specified benchmarks. Specify targets for groups of students. Check that your goal is inclusive so that 100% of students have a goal. In other words, it's OK to specify 80% of students will reach X benchmark, but don't forget to also set a goal for the remaining 20% of students. Check the other criteria of a S-M-A-A-H-R-T goal to make sure you have specified all the details you need to start working toward the goal.

In action:

A second-grade math team decides the specifics for their initial student-learning goal.

District Data:	Over the past three years, we noticed that the number of students entering remedial math classes in ninth grade has increased by 30%. District data show gaps in proficiency in the foundations of math as early as when students exit fifth grade.
School State Test Data:	At our elementary school, as early as third grade, we noticed approximately 25% of students show low scores in understanding math concepts.
Second-Grade End-of-Year Benchmark Data:	Approximately 1 out of every 3 second-grade students is not at proficiency in the computational fluency standard.
Initial Specific Student-Learning Goal:	By May, 11 second-grade students who are not yet proficient will demonstrate computational fluency. Students will demonstrate understanding of multi-digit numbers (up to 1,000) written in base-ten notation, recognizing that the digits in each place represent amounts of thousands, hundreds, tens, or ones (e.g., 853 is 8 hundreds + 5 tens + 3 ones).

Note to the reader: This goal is *specific*. Next steps will be for the team to decide the other criteria of a S-M-A-A-H-R-T goal. With this, the team will have an initial direction. Once team inquiry begins, the team will assess students and analyze data to a greater extent, and can target this goal further. An example of what that could look like follows.

Team Question: Where is understanding breaking down for kids? Are they able to notate a double-digit number in base-ten notation? Are they able to add double digits applying the strategy of pulling out tens and ones?

Design the Formative Assessment: In school, we will administer a teacher-created six-question assessment.

Task: For the first three questions, students will need to write double-digit numbers in base-ten notation. For the second three questions, students will need to add double-digit numbers and explain the strategy they used to get the answer.

Criteria for Success: *What we want to see: number talk strategy.*

22 = 10 + 10 + 2

I pulled out the tens and the ones.

11 + 14 = ?

10 + 1 + 10 + 4 = ?

10 + 10 = 20, 1 + 4 = 5, 20 + 5 = 25

I pulled out the tens and the ones.

Analysis:

We observe: 15 out of 30 kids applied the "counting on" strategy to all math addition problems.

Sample student work 1: 11 + 14 = 25 I started at 11 and added 14 cubes.

Sample student work 2: 11 + 14 = 23 I started at 11 and counted on with my fingers 11, 12, 13, 14, and so on.

We infer: These students are over-reliant on the "counting on" strategy. It is inefficient when adding double digits, slows kids down, increases errors, and indicates that they may not understand units of 10.

Target Goal: Fifteen identified students will demonstrate understanding of units of 10 by using the number talk strategy, in which they pull out tens and ones, to add double-digit numbers. These students will rely less on the "counting on" strategy.

Teacher Pathway Goals: We will create supplementary teaching resources to target the identified skills. . . . We will develop push-in supports for specific, identified students. . . . We will learn strategies from Kathy Richardson's "Developing Number Concepts" book series.

STL recommendations:

Toss out the random percentage goals. You've seen it and maybe even written it—a goal like *80% of students will get a proficient score in English language arts on the state test by May.* As written, this goal is specific, but it is seemingly so. It leaves many unanswered questions: Is 80% a number that came from data? Can whoever set this goal identify which students are in that 80%? What do students need to learn in order to get a proficient score? What about the remaining 20% of students; what goal do they need? The details of this goal don't provide the team with a small enough data-informed focus. (See Move 6.8 for further learning about how to measure a goal.)

Start with an aim. If you don't yet have all the data you need to target a goal and get as specific as I am suggesting, start with an aim such as *80% of students will get a proficient score,* but write it with the intent of revising your goal as soon as you have the data you need to make targeted decisions.

Tweak the language. The language of your team goal is for your team—not an administrator, not parents—it's for you and your colleagues. Write the specifics in a way that gives clarity and direction to everyone tasked with achieving the goal. Don't worry about fitting it into a neat, one-sentence format. Write it so that it makes sense to your team.

Find the right words:

- *What specific student-centered problem, challenge, or need shows up in the data?*

- *What do we expect students should be able to understand, know, and do? Which students? How soon can we hit this target? What additional targets must we set for other groups of students?*

- *What details do we need to decide on so that we know where we are headed?*

Related reading:

Move 7.13, "Target and plan for student success." Once your team has a direction for your work and you are in the *Strategize & Design* STL phase of collaborative inquiry, target goals for small groups or individual students and decide plans that you can implement immediately. A plan might include reteaching to a small selected group of students or designing an intervention.

FIGURE 25   STL Tool for Setting S-M-A-A-H-R-T Goals

You have a goal. Is it S-M-A-A-H-R-T? Or seemingly so? Check it against the following criteria:

Specific	Our goal . . . • is targeted. It specifies which group of students will make what gains, by when, and by how much.
Measurable	Our goal . . . • is informed by data. Numbers and percentages are not baseless or arbitrary. • measures learning outcomes. • relies on formative assessments to guide our decisions. • provides indicators of learning beyond performance on a single assessment.
Attainable	Our goal . . . • is within reach, but also the stretch students and teachers need. • can be accomplished without burning people out. • is not dumbed down because of limited resources or unhealthy aspects of our school culture. We plan to creatively get what we need to attain the goal.
Aligned	Our goal . . . • aims to advance school priorities. • connects to our everyday "real" work with students. • does not compete with other goals.
Heartfelt	Our goal . . . • matters to us and would make a difference to students/families. We intend and are committed to achieving our goal.
Results-driven	Our goal . . . • articulates student-learning results we expect to see. If we fall short on student outcomes, important educator resources and learning will still result. • (if academic) targets a high-leverage standard or skill and attempts to dismantle inequities. • will ultimately have a positive influence on our district-school-department climate and culture. We know that these results can take time to show up.
Time-bound	Our goal . . . • is designed to be accomplished within a time frame set first and foremost around student need, not calendar logistics or restrictions. We are intentional about what we desire to accomplish at different checkpoints (by the end of 6 weeks, by the end of 12 weeks, etc.), and we know we can set goals that extend beyond one school year.

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