

What's Your Performance Agenda?

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NOTE: No, this is not a guide to achieving 'hidden' agendas J

Setting a Performance Agenda

A 'performance agenda' is a tool that converts your small group into a performance machine by:

- Focusing your group on performance
- Demanding that you translate aspirations into SMART outcome-based goals
- Helping you use those goals to choose between the two key disciplines of small group performance: team versus single leader
- Shifting your debate over prioritization from abstract wrangling about 'importance' to real world implications of resource constraints

Two Disciplines, Not One

Small groups perform best when they use two disciplines: *single leader and team*.

Single leader is the familiar discipline: A boss divides up the work into individual tasks and holds each person accountable for his or her best effort and contribution.

Team, by contrast, requires a small number of people with complementary skills to have a shared purpose, shared performance goals and a commonly agreed upon working approach to which – purpose, goals and approach – they hold themselves both individually and mutually accountable.

Most small groups need both disciplines to achieve overall performance. The key lies in using performance itself – specifically SMART outcome-based goals – to choose which discipline to deploy and when.

Converting Aspirations Into Performance Challenges

Your group has purposes and aspirations. So, open the door to group performance by asking, "How would we know we succeeded against our aspirations?" Then use SMART outcome-based goals to answer the question.

Here's how:

- Take the time to discuss, articulate and reach a shared understanding about your group's aspirations. Note the plural – there are likely more than one aspiration.
- For each aspiration, ask and answer, "How would we know we succeeded?"
- Convert your answers into outcomes; that is, do not set activity-based goals that merely describe the steps you would take to achieve your aspirations (e.g. "Prepare a plan for succeeding in the next 2 months").

Instead, if you find yourselves describing activities, ask "How would we know we succeeded?" again – only this time with reference to those activities. (E.g. "How would we know that the plan we prepared succeeded?")

- Once you have outcomes, make sure they are SMART:
 - Specific
 - Measurable/Assessable
 - Aggressive yet achievable
 - Relevant to the challenge at hand
 - Time bound

Use SMART Outcome-Based Goals To Choose Disciplines

Once your group has converted aspirations into SMART outcome-based goals, ask and answer which discipline [*single leader or team?*] is most likely to achieve those goals. In other words, use performance as your guide.

Imagine an aspiration such as “Grow sales” that becomes a SMART goal such as, “Increase sales in each territory by 15% over the next 6 months.”

If you are a small sales group of territory sales reps, then you should ask, “Which discipline – single leader or team – is needed to achieve this goal?”

Here’s the key to your answer: “Can we reasonably expect performance through the sum of individual best efforts?”

If yes, as probably in this example, then use single leader. If no, use team.

Now, consider this aspiration: “We need to increase sales while dramatically reducing cycle time to collections.” Perhaps, for example, your sales group is being asked to take advantage of a reengineered process of ‘sales close to collection’ that involves new technology as well as better integration with accounts receivable and shipping.

A SMART outcome might be: “Over the next 6 months, increase sales by 15% while simultaneously cutting the cycle time from close-to-collection from 45 days to less than a week.”

It is likely your small group will need participation from folks in shipping, technology and accounts receivable. You would be wise to invite them to join in the description of aspirations and the conversion of aspirations into SMART outcomes.

When such a group asks, "Can we achieve this SMART outcome through the sum of individual best efforts?" the answer may well be "No".

It's highly likely that achieving performance will demand real time collaboration among sales, technology, shipping and/or accounts receivable. If so, there will need to be 'subgroups' assigned mutual accountability for the SMART outcome described above.

Mutual accountability. That's a tip off that the subgroups will need to use the team discipline.

Use resources not 'importance' to prioritize

Exhibit A provides the form for a performance agenda.

Notice that it requires your small group to work through the logic of:

- Aspirations
- SMART outcomes
- Which Discipline?
- Responsibility

In addition, pay particular attention to the line separating challenges you'll work on versus those you'll defer. This agenda asks you to separate what's 'above the line' versus 'below the line'.

And, it asks you to use resources, not 'importance', to make that choice.

Why?

Because more than a quarter century of experience with teams has taught me that most small groups face more challenges that are 'important' than they have resources to staff. *Arguing over 'importance' is a trap. What inevitably happens is an illusion: the group 'talks itself into' unrealistic resource demands and ends up assigning too few resources to too many jobs than they could ever realistically accomplish.*

This performance agenda, in contrast, assumes your group has already separated out the unimportant from the important – and still faces serious resource constraints.

It demands that you ask, answer and decide:

- Will you assign responsibility and resources against explicit SMART outcome-based goals linked to the aspirations that matter?
- Will you demand and expect those people assigned to devote the time and effort required for meeting the goals within the time frames specified?

Put differently, will real and specific people actually be identified, assigned and held accountable for success?

The performance agenda encourages your group to make choices in the real world of constrained resources instead of the illusory world of 'importance'. Aspirations that are 'below the line' are all 'important'. Indeed, some may be even more important than those 'above the line'. It's just that in the real world of your group and your organization, you cannot find the resources to hold them realistically accountable at this moment.

Use your performance agenda to manage your group

Once your group has a performance agenda, use it to monitor progress of those assigned to SMART goals, including how well they are using the two disciplines for small group performance. When any SMART goal is achieved, use the performance agenda to move something else from 'below the line' to 'above the line'. Finally, remember that circumstances change – new aspirations emerge and existing aspirations morph. Use your performance agenda to 'refresh' your group's understanding of the challenges you face, what success looks like against those aspirations and challenges, which discipline makes the most sense against which goals, and how and why resources demand that you choose to put some things 'above the line' and others 'below the line'.

Exhibit A: Performance Agenda For Small Groups

Aspirations we are resourcing	SMART Outcome-based goals	Which Discipline?	Responsibility (names)
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Other aspirations we have but are not resourcing

Illustrative SMART outcomes indicating success

About Douglas K. Smith



Douglas K. Smith is co-author of *The Discipline of Teams* and *The Wisdom of Teams* – books widely considered as the best ever written about teams and that have been used by millions of people world wide.

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