

Are “Attainable and Realistic” Goals Always “SMART?”

We may be short-changing ourselves by setting the bar too low.

BY JON A. HULTMAN, DPM, MBA

Will Rogers once said, “It’s not what we don’t know that gets us into trouble, it’s what we know that isn’t so.” Have you ever seen an innovative business idea stopped dead in its tracks by someone invoking a “universal truth” which they have either read somewhere, heard quoted from a “business guru,” or seen used by others so frequently that they feel it must be the “absolute truth?” One such “truth” that we frequently hear is that we should set S.M.A.R.T. goals—S.M.A.R.T. being an acronym for: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely. Who can argue the validity of this advice? We can. While such “truths” have developed over time because they have practical applications in some situations, there is not one that is universally applicable. At minimum, always setting “attainable and realistic” goals can put an end to “out of the box” thinking and creativity—thinking required when we are searching for significant opportunities—ones which are seemingly out of reach.

The primary reason for missing opportunities or not accomplishing as much as we could is that we seldom set aside sufficient time to plan and develop strategies for reaching our major goals. Days go by quickly in a busy office; we have little time to “think things through,” and most decisions are directed simply at “putting out fires” and “getting through the day.” We even become backlogged with much of our work incomplete at the end of the day—work that must be caught up at a later time. In this type of environment, it is challenging to find time for setting

long-term goals and developing strategies for achieving them. One solution to this dilemma is to get away from the routine office environment and devote a few days to a retreat focused on contemplation of the “big issues.”

Unfortunately, even when we finally set aside time from our practices to discuss plans for achieving our long-term major goals, we often miss

improvement will not accomplish this goal—one that is ten times larger! This more challenging effort will force us to think of ideas that we would never have considered when working towards a 10% improvement—ideas such as: adding associates and/or ancillary services, implementing advanced technology, moving to a larger space, learning new procedures, negotiating

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the biggest opportunities altogether because while at these retreats, we set the bar too low.

While setting realistic and attainable goals is, at times, good business advice, following this prescription “to the tee” limits our possibilities to incremental—rather than major—change. Of course, we sometimes may only be looking for incremental improvement, but when we seek the type of major improvement necessary for future success, my feeling is that we need to set the bar high—almost “too high”—and well beyond our comfort level. This forces us to think “out of the box”—to entertain new and radical ideas we would not otherwise have considered. For example, setting the goal to increase one’s practice profitability by 10% is a realistic, attainable goal, and we should be able to find a number of relatively “easy” ways to accomplish this; however, consider what would happen if we were to set this improvement goal at 100%.

The “standard” ideas and tasks necessary for achieving a 10% im-

provement will not accomplish this goal—one that is ten times larger! This more challenging effort will force us to think of ideas that we would never have considered when working towards a 10% improvement—ideas such as: adding associates and/or ancillary services, implementing advanced technology, moving to a larger space, learning new procedures, negotiating

better contracts through evidence-based medicine, collaborating with peers, forming strategic alliances, or merging practices—all changes that have the potential of a profound improvement in quality of care and service. Even if we fall short of our intended improvement of 100%, the odds are much greater that with this type of focus, our increase in profit will be greater than the 10% we might have originally sought. The time to begin such planning is now. Set aside time for a retreat, and when at that retreat, focus on the fact that thinking S.M.A.R.T. is not always the smartest thing to do. **PM**



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