



# Update

## Beware of Strategies Masquerading as Objectives (and Objectives that Aren't Well Defined)

by Laura Schildkraut

Have you ever overloaded your dishwasher? You focus completely on getting every last dish and every last glass and every last utensil loaded. Then you breathe a sigh of relief as you press "start." An hour later, as the wash cycle completes, you return to find that the dishes and glasses and utensils aren't really clean.

Have you ever had three loads of laundry to do, but because of lack of time or lack of quarters, you forced it into two loads? What happens? The clothes just don't get clean.

Whether you realized it or not, what you did was mistake your strategy for your objective. By stating, "I need to run the dishwasher" or "I need to finish my laundry" rather than "I need clean dishes and clean clothes," you put more focus on the *doing* than the desired result. So you spend your time *doing* without getting the desired result. Sadly, this happens all the time with business initiatives and projects.

That's why understanding the true difference between objective and strategy matters. It's easy to define them in the abstract, but it gets a lot more confusing when you start to look at a specific project. If you're not careful, it's even easier to confuse the two once the project is underway.

Let's review some definitions. Here are four key words to keep in mind when assigning or planning any project:

**1. Objective.** This is what you hope to accomplish.

- 2. Goal.** This is the measure of the accomplishment. Goals will usually contain two components: an amount (*how much*) and a deadline (*by when*).
- 3. Strategy.** This is the approach you use to meet your objective. It's *how* you will approach the project.
- 4. Tactic(s).** This encompasses the specific things you will do that support your strategy to meet your objectives. Tactics are the "*detailed how*."

### OBJECTIVE

Defining and communicating your objective correctly and accurately is critical to project success. If you're not clear about what you need to accomplish, there's a strong probability that your project will go off course. An objective must be clear and accurate; for example, increase revenue, reduce costs, increase employee satisfaction, reduce downtime, and so on.

### Clarity

Some objectives may have a quantitative component, but others may appear to be qualitative. For example, if you're implementing training for a new system, your objective may be to create a successful training program. But you need to ask yourself what you mean by successful. What factors need to occur for you to define this as a success? Do you, your staff, and your client view success similarly? The more clear you are here, the more likely you and your staff will create a plan to meet your objectives, and the more likely that your goals will focus on what's truly important.

### Accuracy

The next thing that's difficult about objective setting is thinking your objective is one thing when it's really something else. Many years ago, my neighbors built a large shed very close to a property line we shared. This was within their rights, but it negatively impacted me. I felt it was time to move. I very clearly told my realtor that my primary objective was "to live on a property large enough that I wasn't impacted by what my

neighbors do with their property.” The next weekend, my realtor showed me seven properties on large lots, with the houses far from the property lines. It was exactly what I’d asked for, but I didn’t like a single one of them. Why? Because the houses were too big, too small, too dark, and so on. What I had told my realtor was my primary objective really wasn’t. The house itself was as important as the property, maybe even more so once I recovered from the frustration regarding my current home. In this case, I thought I was giving an accurate assessment of what was important to me. Clearly, I hadn’t thought it through. How often do we all do that?

There’s another potential pitfall at the intersection of clarity and accuracy. Consider a scenario where the sales manager tells you that, for a newly launched service, the sales staff has been told, out of the gate, to “sell as much as it can.” The sales systems need to be ready to support the push. The sales manager may have assumed he was being clear and accurate, yet the different ways to interpret his words have significant impact downstream. The words imply a focus on sales volume. But what if the sales manager really cares more about revenue? That would not only impact the sales staff’s actions but also IT’s requirements. What are the true objectives for the sales staff and what are the true objectives for IT?

The lesson here is to think carefully and be sure you (and your client) are clear and accurate before giving marching orders. The best way to avoid accidentally misrepresenting the true objective is to think carefully about how you and/or your client will measure success. What gets measured gets done. Speaking of measures ...

## GOAL

A goal is the measure of what you hope to achieve by when. Therefore, the goal contains two elements: a numeric target and a time frame. It’s a scorecard to see how well you’re doing toward meeting your objective. For example, if your project is to improve system reliability, one of your goals could be to achieve 99.9% uptime by a specific date. Requiring yourself to define goals and to achieve those milestones forces you to create tangible measures of results and a tracking number along the way to use to determine whether

your department’s projects are on course. Sometimes it’s easy to get so focused on the level of effort you’re expending that it’s hard to see whether or not you’re really making significant progress. Goals will often sit between objectives and strategies. Tracking your goals will tell you whether your strategy is working.

## STRATEGY

The strategy is the approach you use to meet your goals to accomplish your objective. So while being sure that you’ve accurately determined your objective is important, having a winning strategy is critical as well. As your staff thinks through the plan, challenge or require team members to propose three completely different strategies (or approaches) for meeting the objectives. The first one will probably come easily, since it’s not uncommon to be thinking about solutions before the problem or opportunity is clearly defined. Forcing your team to go further, however, encourages members to think more creatively about what needs to be accomplished and to come up with new ideas that may be more effective, more efficient ways to achieve the objective. Often more than one strategy is used to solve a business problem. Once your team provides three strategies, it will likely find that it wants to use parts of each to approach the project.

After you’ve agreed upon the strategy or strategies, be sure to communicate those broadly and effectively. The clarity of your approach will enable a larger team to work on a project without the constant need for prioritization meetings.

## TACTICS

Tactics are the details of a plan. When most people think about tactics, they assume it means the detailed task list for the project. That’s a good start, but a thorough definition of tactics goes well beyond that. Be sure to encourage your staff to detail what the scope of the project includes; that is, what are the project’s boundaries. Then staff members should articulate the things outside the scope that others might assume could be part of the project. This clarity will not only serve to set project expectations but may also reduce inadvertent scope creep.

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Have your staff list the team members as well as the broader group of project stakeholders. Stakeholders are those who will be affected by the project, even if they aren't on the project team. Then detail the roles and responsibilities of each. This helps determine whether the project has the right staffing. It will also assure that those who need to be involved in, or informed about, key project decisions and progress will be in the communication loop.

Needless to say, every project needs a detailed schedule. This works best when it includes the task list with the start date, target completion, key point person, and other staff members involved. Next, create a project budget that outlines all the anticipated project expenses. For both schedule and budget, including a generous buffer is strongly advisable. Even the best planned projects rarely come in early and under budget.

Finally, no project is without risk. The more thoroughly the team thinks through the risks, the more likely it can circumvent problems, or at least catch problems early when they arise. That why it's advisable to also discuss contingency plans to implement should these difficulties come forth. It gives the team confidence when it knows how to react to address or resolve the inherent challenges in any project.

## THE PROBLEM IS ... THE PROBLEM

Below are two examples of how seemingly clear projects can go awry. It often depends upon who defines the problem.

After moving from New York to Seattle, I bought my first house. Shortly after I moved in, I was on the phone with my Dad. I told him that everything in the house was great except that I needed a new faucet for the kitchen sink. He told me to go to a hardware store, select a faucet, and then see whether the store could refer me to a reputable plumber. The next day I went shopping and discovered that the faucets I liked were expensive! I asked how much it would cost to have a plumber come to the house to install it and that was really expensive, too! So I decided to ignore the problem.

A few months later, my parents were visiting. We were in the kitchen preparing lunch. I showed my Dad the leaky faucet and said, "This is why I need a new faucet." Dad, a former hardware store owner, gently shook his head as if to say "Haven't I taught you anything?!" and then softly said, "You don't need a new faucet. You need to replace the washer."

If I'd bought a new faucet and hired a plumber to install it, would that have solved the problem? Sure. But it would have cost over US \$400 instead of 15 cents for the washer and five minutes of Dad's time — no charge. It wasn't that clear to me then, but as I look back, what I'd done was present a strategy — "buy a new faucet" — as an objective. But the objective was really "stop the leak."

If I had told my Dad that the faucet was leaking, he would have told me to replace the washer. But I didn't say that and he wasn't there to see for himself. Another critical lesson is that you can't always trust the accuracy when others define the problem for you. How many times has a client told you what system it needs or wants without detailing the problem it's trying to solve? More often than not, when people tell you what they need or want done, they're stating their request in terms of the solution that they've already determined is necessary to solve the problem. However, they may not be focusing on the core problem, and they may not have presented the best solution.

Here's another example. There's a wonderful program at the University of Washington Business School called BEPD (the Business & Economic Development Program). In this program, a team of undergraduate students works with a local small business to help it solve a business problem. Many years ago, one project team was assigned to work with a small travel agency. The agency wanted to open a second location and was seeking advice on how to select the right office space. The students talked to the company owners to determine what they needed in this new office space and how much they could afford to pay for rent. The team viewed the project as follows:

1. **Objective.** Find a location for a second office.
2. **Goal.** Sign a lease by the end of June for office space that is less than \$1,000 per month.
3. **Strategy.** Find office space in the desired neighborhood that has been vacant for a while so the landlord may be flexible on the rental rate.
4. **Tactic.** Divide the neighborhood into segments and have each BEPD team member go to the office buildings in that segment to find available space that meets the client's requirements.

The students then started looking at office space. Everything they looked at either didn't meet the criteria or was so expensive that the small agency would not have been able to support the costs. Feeling defeated and frustrated, the students went back to tell the client that they had struck out.

Then one student asked the magic question, “Why do you need another office?”

The client explained, “A lot of our Spanish-speaking clients from all over the region call us to get information on different airline flights, vacation packages, and so on. We spend a lot of time on the phone with them, but many of them never come in to buy their tickets from us. When we call to follow up, they tell us they went to another travel agency within walking distance of their homes to purchase the tickets. Many of our clients are not comfortable with checks or credit cards. They prefer to pay in cash.”

The students then realized that the purpose of the project (objective) was not “to find a second location” but to “increase revenue.” Opening a second location may have been one possible approach (strategy) for solving this problem, but it certainly wasn’t the best. The cost of supporting that second location would have negatively impacted the small agency and it still wouldn’t have provided the breadth of coverage the agency needed.

The students came back with a brilliant idea. They made an arrangement with a local bank that had many branches throughout the region. The agency’s customers could deposit money in the agency’s account to cover the price of the trip, and then the agency would mail the tickets to the customer. The bank fee for this service was dramatically lower than opening a new location would have been, and this approach gave the agency coverage in many more neighborhoods. This new approach could be presented as follows:

1. **Objective.** Increase revenue.
2. **Goal.** By the end of the year, increase the percentages of ticket purchases among clients who call for advice from 35% to 65%.
3. **Strategy.** Enable people to pay for tickets closer to their homes.
4. **Tactic.** Arrange with a local bank to accept cash payment for trip tickets.

The agency’s customers were delighted with the new approach to paying for tickets. Many admitted that they’d felt badly calling this agency for advice and then going to a different agency to purchase the tickets. The agency easily exceeded its goal.

Even though this scenario took place awhile ago, it’s a great example of how incorrectly defining the objective can send the project off in a direction that may not solve the core problem. It also shows how important it is to

ask questions up front to be sure that the stated objective is the true objective.

So how can you tell when you’ve got a strategy masquerading as an objective? Ask yourself, if I do X, will I (or my client) automatically be happy/satisfied? Will it truly solve the problem? If the answer is “no” or even “maybe,” you’re probably not focused on your real objective. If the travel agency had opened a second office and ticket purchases did not increase significantly, would the agency had been satisfied with the result? No. So that wasn’t really its objective.

Remember that an objective is something you achieve — an outcome; a strategy is something you do. So if you start to focus on what you need to do before you’re really clear on what you hope to achieve, you’re at risk of confusing a strategy with an objective. Increased revenue is an outcome. Opening a second location is an action.

As an IT executive, while some of your projects (for example, infrastructure projects) will be driven directly by your organization, many other projects will be conducted on behalf of one or more business units. Before you and your team move forward, be sure that, even in today’s rushed world where everything is needed yesterday, you take the time to ask why the system change is needed, what this change is expected to achieve, and what a perfect world would look like. Ask the what-if questions. All of this will serve to confirm the clarity and accuracy of the true objective and assure that you don’t have a strategy masquerading as an objective.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Schildkraut is the founder of Onboarding Gen Y whose mission is to help organizations attract, retain, and see excellence from their Gen Y employees. This is accomplished through consulting and workshops and establishing internal, reciprocal mentorship programs. Ms. Schildkraut is a faculty member at the University of Washington, teaching classes focused on innovation, entrepreneurship, professionalism, and communication. Her course entitled “Management Lessons from *The Apprentice*” earned her national recognition from CNN and *Dateline*. Ms. Schildkraut was the host and co-executive producer of *Information Technology Leaders*, *On the Career Path*, and *Information Matters*, television shows that aired on ResearchChannel and UWTW. Prior to Onboarding Gen Y and the University of Washington, she worked for Microsoft, Ogilvy & Mather, and the US National Association of Securities Dealers (NASD). Ms. Schildkraut holds an MBA from NYU’s Stern Business School with concentrations in IS and marketing. She can be reached at laurasc@msn.com.

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