

Goals vs. Objectives – What’s the Difference?

It's often hard to know the difference between goals and objectives – in fact, we often use the two terms interchangeably. But knowing the difference can help us to use both in a constructive way, to get us from where we are to where we want to go.

Both are a Way of Moving Forward

The major similarity between goals and objectives is that they both involve *forward motion*, but accomplish it in very different ways. We can think of goals as being the Big Picture — where we hope that our efforts will ultimately bring us. Objectives are about a specific plan of attack — usually a series of them — each being relatively short-term in nature.

Goals: Changing Mindset and Direction

Goals tend to be long on direction, and short on specific tactics. For example, you can set a goal of losing 30 pounds without having a specific plan as to how to do it. *You've defined the destination you want to arrive at*, and tactics can be developed as you move forward.

We can think of a goal as doing the following:

- Defines the destination
- Changes the direction to move toward the destination
- Changes the mindset to adjust to and support the new direction
- Creates the necessity to develop specific tactics

Goals tend to change your mindset by changing your focus. And as your focus changes, it takes your thinking with it. This is why goals are often accompanied by *affirmations*, which involve projecting yourself into the desired (but as yet unattained) destination.

People set goals all the time, without ever being very specific. Organizations do it too. A company can set a goal of returning to profitability in two years, or becoming the leader in their industry in five years, all without ever determining how that will be accomplished.

And once again, the details are worked out later, after the big picture changes of direction and destination — or goals — have been changed and defined.

Objectives: Establishing a Series of Concrete Steps

If goals are about the big picture, then objectives are all about tactics. Mechanically, tactics are action plans to get from where you are to where you want to be. A goal defines the direction and destination, but the road to get there is accomplished by a series of objectives.

A good example of this is a person who owes \$50,000 in credit card debt on ten different cards and wants to become debt-free. Getting out of debt is the goal. But it is achieved by paying off each of the

ten credit cards, one at a time. The payoff of each credit card is an objective — the series of smaller targets that need to be hit in order to achieve the big picture goal of becoming debt-free.

The methodology for paying off each credit card will be very specific — i.e., you'll need to pay X amount of extra money to Credit Card #1 for Y number of months in order to meet the objective of paying it off. Then you need to repeat the action for the remaining nine credit cards. The tactics — which are the objectives — are very specific.

How Objectives Can Help You Reach Your Goals

In nearly any goal you want to reach you can use the credit card example to help you get there. First, you define the goal — whatever it may be. Unless the goal is a small one and easily obtained, it's usually best to break big goals down to a series of specific action steps — it's a way of using the divide-and-conquer strategy to accomplish a goal that's far too large to do in the near term.

The action steps have specific targets, as well as methods to reach them. Each target is an objective. Once it's accomplished you move on to the next one, gradually moving toward your goal as each target is completed.

Though goals generally control objectives, objectives can also control goals as they unfold. For example, since a goal is general in nature, it may be refined and altered as objectives are completed. The completion of an objective or a series of them, could cause you to either raise or lower the ultimate goal.

In this way goals and objectives can complement each other.

	Goals	Objectives
Definition	Something which you try to achieve	A specific result that a person or system aims to achieve within a time frame and with available resources.
Time Frame	Usually long-term.	A series of smaller steps, often along the way to achieving a long-term goal.
Magnitude	Typically involves life changing outcomes, like retiring, buying a home or making a major career change.	Usually a near-term target of a larger expected outcome, such as passing a course as part of completing a degree program.
Outcome of immediate action	Actions tend to advance progress in a very general sense; there is often awareness that there are several ways to reach a goal, so specific outcomes aren't necessary.	Very specific and measurable, a target is established and victory is declared only when the target is hit.
Purpose of action	A goal is often characterized as a change of direction that will ultimately lead to a desired outcome.	Objectives tend to be actions aimed at accomplishing a certain task.
Example	"I want to retire by age 50"	"In order to reach my goal of retiring at age 50, I need to save \$20,000 by the end of this year"
Hierarchy	Goals tend to control objectives; a change in a goal could eliminate one or more objectives, or add new ones.	An objective can modify a goal, but will seldom change it in a fundamental way, even if the objective isn't reached.

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