

SOLVING MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES



Ten words that work wonders for daily communication

BY MOLLY A. BADGETT | JUNE 2020

They're familiar business buzzwords: goals, objectives, strategies, tactics, metrics, etc.; they can make your head spin when placed in platitudes about planning and processes. They are the words that get businesses and ideas off the ground, and they fuel project management. They paint pictures of a company's core and give big-picture purpose to its people.

These words are universal to businesses and organizations, large and small. Each business or organization has at least one goal. Each defines its objectives and implements strategies necessary to meet them. Whether you're a sole proprietorship or part of a mega S-corporation, you execute tactics to initiate change. Metrics gauge success or failure.

Blah, blah, and lots more blah. These words are used again and again, and at such a lofty level, until they become almost meaningless. Still, in the one specific area where

they could matter more – ***in the part of our day-to-day where these and other select words could help us engage and keep business moving forward*** – they are sorely underused.

The area I'm referring to? *Day-to-day communication*. And the words I'm referring to?

- *Situation*
- *Stakeholder*
- *Goal*
- *Objective*
- *Strategy*
- *Tactic*
- *Resource*
- *Timeline*
- *Budget*
- *Metric*



When used purposefully and accurately, these 10 words alone can align even the most off-kilter frames of references to facilitate better communication and propel all participants in any endeavor in the right direction. When part of everyday, even mundane, communication, they promote common understanding and help identify – practically *pinpoint* – where misunderstandings reside.

These words, spoken or only implied as if by second nature, enhance day-to-day communication because they are the very essence of, the very language of, doing business. For every business action – from high-level asset acquisition to routine email management (actually, for any action, business or otherwise) – these words ubiquitously usher along every action, every step, from start to finish.

It's no wonder why these are the core concepts of any communications plan, or why you'll find many of these terms in a strategic or business plan. Unfortunately, it's at that 30,000-foot planning level where they are typically left to dwell.

Lesson one: an easy example

During the 10 years that I taught undergraduate business communications at Georgia State University, I added these concepts to my curriculum. After all, "excellent communication skills" are every employer's dream traits in a job candidate and too few college students rise to the challenge, whether we're talking written or verbal skills, or one's ability to think critically and effectively communicate accordingly.

Each semester, I found the lesson was new to and welcomed by every student; none had a working knowledge of all of these concepts independently, much less as a cohesive set of key terms that, when used together, underscore the very foundation of activity and serve to strengthen understanding by lending reference points common to all involved in that activity.

The point of the first lesson was simplicity...

...starting with a fictional **situation**: Your neighbor is going on vacation for a week and needs someone to look after her two dogs. You agree to be the dogs' caretaker.

The task involves you, your neighbor, and your neighbors' dogs – all **stakeholders**. (Others, such as a spouse or

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children, might be included if they're to get involved in taking care of the dogs.)

What's the overall **goal**? To keep the dogs alive.

Unlike the goal, your **objective** is measurable and answers the question, "How alive must you keep the dogs?" The answer: Keep the dogs as alive (read: happy and healthy) when the neighbor returns as they were before she left (save for aging one week).

Your **strategies** answer "What do I do to (or, how do I) meet my objective?" The strategies are to 1) feed and water the dogs, 2) walk the dogs, 3) let the dogs exercise/play, and 4) avoid danger.

Tactics go further into the minute-by-minute activities and cover everything from rising 30 minutes earlier than usual every morning, putting on old play clothes (the dogs are big and playful!), taking the keys to the neighbor's house to unlock the door, putting food and water into the dogs' bowls, etc., all the way to returning home when you're done, and then repeating some or other steps at least one more time, including right before bedtime.

The **resources** you'll need include an alarm clock, old clothes, the neighbor's house keys, food, water, bowls, leashes, refuse bags, dog toys, a dog park, and about two hours of each day.

Because the neighbor is leaving Saturday morning and returning the following Friday evening, your **timeline** is to begin the task Saturday afternoon and continue, daily, until Friday afternoon.

Is there a **budget**? Always, including the opportunity cost of not being able to do something else one night that week with friends because you've promised to take care of the neighbor's two dogs. (The budget is not always monetary.)

When the neighbor arrives home, you both review the **metrics**: the dogs are as happy and healthy as they were when the neighbor left. You've succeeded in meeting your objective.

Applicable anywhere, anytime

The point here is that these terms are not reserved for high-level processes, such as planning. They are living, breathing tools that can be applied to every aspect of our lives, explicitly or implicitly. They are interdependent, too; when one element changes, it has the "butterfly effect" of affecting other elements.

Say that, in our example above, one of the dogs starts to limp on Wednesday morning. You avoided danger and never saw the dog directly hurt, so you assess this can't be the result of a new injury. You call the neighbor and find out that, sure enough, the dog has arthritis and needs rest and anti-inflammatory medication; the situation analysis was incomplete, changing your strategies, tactics and resources for the rest of the week. The next time you care for a neighbor's dogs, you'll do a more thorough job of information-gathering (i.e., you'll insist on better communication from the owner) to define the situation and, therefore, execute the task.

Every action you take in most any endeavor – again, from massive to mundane – involves these very elements. In

the rush of the day on a relatively simple undertaking, they usually go unidentified. Identify them early on – with agreement, particularly on the objectives, from all stakeholders – and you have a common language that becomes the backbone for on-target, accountable communication. Identify them on the backside of a task or project and you have the ability to reverse-engineer any problem areas to see where communication failed.

By using the structure of these 10 terms, you will always – *always* – be able to pinpoint where you are in the scheme of the communication "volleyball game" within a team or with other stakeholders. You will be able to get back on track and correct communication that's missing or off-point. You will be able to direct and fine-tune outsiders' focus on specific aspects of a project or process. And, you will, more often than not, steer clear of emotion that might cloud communication around a situation that draws debate.

It takes practice to form communications along the lines of these 10 trusty terms, and it's not always a perfect process. There will be debate over what's a goal vs. an objective, or an objective vs. a strategy. These differences over the semantics shouldn't deter you from depending on a likeness of the structure, however. The point is that there is, in fact, a structure you can implement to greatly improve communication if you're willing to let go of poor communication habits and learn a new way of using something that's already so familiar.



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