

# Clear and Effective Objectives

## Introduction

A Decision Analysis will only be successful if you invest time and effort making sure that the purpose of your decision is clear.

The first step is the Decision Statement. It should be specific and should represent the main reason for making the decision. And, just as important, you should understand what options it eliminates and what options it includes.

After writing a clear Decision Statement, your next step is to write objectives. Objectives are not simply outcomes you hope to achieve. They are a combination of requirements, restrictions, and resources to be considered. They will guide the remainder of the Decision Analysis process, and will shape your final decision.

As important as objectives are to the decision-making process, they're often ignored, poorly defined, or incomplete. In the topic below you'll find tips on establishing a complete and specific list of objectives, as well as pitfalls to avoid along the way.

## A Phased Approach to Setting Objectives

People will occasionally stall when they reach the objective-setting step in Decision Analysis because they find it difficult to translate their needs into specific objectives. One effective method to counter this is to split the objective-generating process into three phases:

### Phase one

List, rather than discuss, all the general and specific needs to be addressed by the decision and factors that should potentially influence the decision.

### Phase two

Look at each of these factors critically and turn it into a specific objective by stating, "with (this need) in mind, my choice should..." For example, "with (maintenance cost) in mind my choice should not exceed \$50,500. With (maintenance cost) in mind, my choice should also minimize the maintenance cost."

### Phase three

Record the measures for the objectives. It's often helpful to add the phrase "as measured by..." or "as demonstrated by..." to identify the measures. For example, for the objective "Minimize utilities cost," the measure could be "as measured by the combined, monthly cost of gas heat, water, and electric."

If you're struggling to compile a complete list of objectives, or if you want to brainstorm additional objectives to make sure you have thought of everything, use the following list of thought-starters. For each thought starter, ask yourself, "How should (thought starter) influence my choice?"

## Helping You Develop Objectives

Project objectives are critical to a successful project outcome because they establish the criteria that you'll use to make decisions about the project and guide the project team.

If you're struggling to compile a complete list of objectives, or if you want to brainstorm additional objectives to make sure you have thought of everything, use the list below to stimulate your thinking. For each thought starter, ask yourself, "How should (thought starter) influence my choice?"

## Thought Starters for Developing Objectives

### **Human Resources**

- Motivation and attitudes
- Skills and ability
- Performance and productivity
- Development and growth
- Health and safety
- Equal rights and opportunities

### **Facilities and Equipment**

- Space
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Location
- Compatibility

### **Organization**

- Relationships among units, functions, individuals
- Discussions
- Responsibility and delegation
- Formal and informal organization
- Coordination
- Information systems

### **Material**

- Sources and availability
- Quality
- Grade
- Handling and storage

### **External Influences**

- Economic trends
- Competition
- Vendors and contractors
- Company image, positioning
- Law and government
- Environment
- Community
- Technology

### **Output**

- Quality
- Quantity
- Pace and timing
- Distribution
- Key strategic indicators

### **Strategy**

- Competitive advantage
- Target market
- Product platforms and mix
- Market size
- Market share

### **Money**

- Capital or fixed costs and expenses
- Support, maintenance, and life cycle costs
- Price
- Margin or profit
- Return

### **Ideas and Process**

- Security, proprietary position
- Knowledge capture and retrieval
- Research
- Capabilities
- Networks

### **Strategy**

- Competitive advantage
- Target market
- Product platforms and mix
- Market size
- Market share
- Key strategic indicators

### **Time**

- Life span of project
- Life span of output
- Time to first return

### **Customers**

- Marketing
- Sales
- Support
- Location

### **Personal**

- Goals and plans
- Family
- Strengths and weaknesses
- Interests
- Values and beliefs

## Auditing Objectives

The process of establishing objectives and classifying them into Musts and Wants is really a process of separation. You have taken the broad purpose of the decision (as represented in the Decision Statement) and pulled it apart to identify, as specifically as possible, the individual objectives, requirements, and criteria that the decision implies.

Working at such a detailed level, you could lose perspective, getting so embroiled in detail that you alter what you're really trying to achieve. It's also tempting to team objectives together that should be separated, and separate objectives that really refer to the same thing. The following strategies will help you conquer some of the difficulties you may encounter when setting objectives.

## ***Testing against the Decision Statement***

After you have listed your objectives, ask “How does each objective relate to the Decision Statement?” When checking the appropriateness of the overall objective picture, the Decision Statement is invaluable. Most conflicts can be mitigated by using the Decision Statement as the basis for the debate. If the relevance of a particular objective to the Decision Statement is questionable, the objective should be modified so it’s relevant to the decision or it should be eliminated from the Decision Analysis.

## ***Avoiding redundancy***

There’s a natural tendency for important objectives to surface more than once in your list—objectives that, though they may be worded differently, actually refer to the same result, resource, or restriction. The danger in this kind of redundancy is that the cumulative weight of two or more similar objectives exercises an undue degree of influence on the decision as a whole. Therefore, check the degree to which objectives are actually discrete, rather than restatements of the same basic theme. For example, should you have “easy to implement” and “minimize number of people required” listed as two separate objectives, or do they, in essence, relate to the same basic objective of “minimize implementation resources?” Establishing measures for each objective will point this out. Two objectives with the same measures are likely to be the same objective.

Questions to ask when reviewing your objectives for redundancy are:

- Is the same idea worded differently and included more than once?
- Are any objectives duplicative or overlapping?”

## ***The bunching phenomenon***

People often have a tendency to bunch ideas together, either because it’s easier to communicate generalities or because they haven’t given enough thought to the meaning behind the objective. Asking questions such as: “Is each objective a single idea?”, “What do we really mean by that objective?”, and “Can any objectives be stated more specifically?” will help reveal objectives that are bunched together.

## ***Validity of Musts***

Complex or important decisions often include several critical factors. With these types of decisions, there is often the temptation to record many objectives as Musts because Musts seem to represent what is most important in the decision.

This is not entirely correct.

Musts are objectives that contain a set limit which represents the absolute minimally acceptable performance for an alternative to qualify for your decision. Your high-weighted Wants reflect what’s important. It’s very possible that you’ll establish a Must objective with a set limit, and then decide that alternatives that pass through the limit should also be compared on how they perform beyond the set limit. In this case, your Must—for example, “Completed by June 15”—also becomes a Want—“Completed as soon as possible.” Here are some questions to test the validity of your Musts:

- Are Musts mandatory and realistic, and do they have a set limit?
- Should any Musts be reflected as Wants?
- Using the Decision Statement, what is it that makes each Must mandatory?
- Are you really prepared to disregard an alternative that does not meet this objective?

## ***Features masquerading as objectives***

When setting an objective, it’s not unusual to have a preconceived idea of how the objective will be met. As a result, some people list the solution to the objective (including features of one or more alternatives), instead of stating its true purpose. Including features in an objective will penalize or eliminate alternatives that create the same result but lack the particular feature. For example, stating that the car selected should have a 3.0 liter engine (because acceleration is important) will penalize alternatives with smaller engines, even if they happen to accelerate faster. Ask yourself, “Are any objectives actually features in disguise?” and “Are any objectives features of one alternative?” to ferret out features masquerading as objectives.

## ***Hidden objectives***

Decisions sometimes go astray because the real objectives that should influence them are not the ones that have been made visible in the decision-making process. In almost all facets of organizational life, there are some objectives that are difficult to make visible. For example, a decision on leasing a fleet of executive vehicles will have objectives around lease costs, reliability, and general operational issues. However, if the vehicles are intended to have a certain prestige value, it is better to list “conveys a prestigious image” as an objective so that this aspect can be assessed in terms of the degree of influence it should have on the overall decision. If such an objective is a critical factor being considered and yet is not made visible, the value of the analysis process is seriously undermined and it becomes difficult to get commitment to the decision that is made. The result of not making hidden objectives visible is that their appropriate degree of influence in the decision is never addressed.

Additionally, many hidden objectives aren’t well-defined. Therefore, they need to be clarified and their specific measures determined.

## ***Balance of short- and long-term objectives***

When making a decision, examine your objectives and ask, “Have short- and long-term objectives been balanced?” Short-term objectives are often more apparent to decision makers. To ensure consideration of long-term objectives, it’s useful to identify the life span of the choice. Ask yourself, “How long will this choice be in operation?” Then imagine yourself at the end of the period, and identify resources to be conserved, results that should be received, or restrictions with which you’ll have to deal. Consider other people that will be impacted during the lifetime of the decision, and involve them in the decision where appropriate.

## ***Stating objectives clearly***

On some occasions, a single objective may mean different things to different people. It’s very important to express exactly what your objectives are trying to achieve, not only to yourself, but to others involved in the decision as well. One common barrier to understanding occurs when objectives get edited down into a few key words and subsequently cause major communication difficulties. It’s always worthwhile to ask, “Will other people be able to understand this objective as clearly as I do?”

## **Summary**

Setting objectives is one of the most important elements of any Decision Analysis process, but people often don’t take the time to ensure they’re doing it correctly. Objectives are a combination of requirements, restrictions, and resources to be considered which will go a long way toward shaping any decision you’ll make. This topic provides a series of strategies to overcome some typical hurdles you’ll face when setting objectives.