



## Writing Outcome Objectives

### A Monitoring and Evaluation Tip Sheet

March 2004

Collectively, our work in tobacco control is directed toward the goal of reducing the occurrence of ill health attributable to tobacco use and exposure to environmental tobacco smoke. In addition, we all recognize there are many things that need to be accomplished to move us toward that goal. We need to encourage and support cessation. We need to prevent young people from choosing to smoke and to protect non-smokers from exposure to environmental tobacco smoke. We need to reshape social norms regarding the acceptability of smoking and denormalize the tobacco industry to expose it as fundamentally different from a "normal" business enterprise. We need to do all of this and perhaps more. Through our own involvements we channel energies into programs and interventions that propose to contribute toward the accomplishment of one or more of these needs.

### Why Bother with Outcome Objectives?

If they do nothing else, outcome objectives help us to understand and communicate to others how we feel our projects and services will contribute to the broader and more enduring goals of tobacco control. However, it is not that they describe a program or strategy in any real sense. Outcome objectives are not about actions or activities, they are about the results of actions and activities. As such, they describe not our efforts, but what we hope will change as a result of our efforts: fewer people will smoke, fewer young people will start smoking, fewer will be exposed to environmental tobacco smoke in the workplace, smoking will come to be seen as more and more socially unacceptable, etc. In this sense, our outcome objectives represent our expectations and hopes when we set out to plan and implement tobacco control initiatives. And when all is said and done, they will stand as the yardstick by which our real or observed accomplishments will be judged.

When we begin a new project, our outcome objectives represent a prediction. But unlike the astrologer's prediction in the morning paper, it is one for which we will be held accountable to one degree or another. Astrologers long ago concluded, and rightfully so, that vague and imprecise predictions can be open to considerable interpretation. There can always be something of the truth in them for those who believe, or want to believe. For those who do not believe, it is equally clear that they contain nothing of the truth. Who is right and who is wrong? Who really cares? In tobacco control, many stakeholders care a great deal about our predictions and, as a result, our outcome objectives need to be written in a manner that will eliminate, or at least reduce, the amount of room for subjective interpretation.

### Getting Started

Writing outcome objectives is often best handled as a group exercise among the team of people to be involved in the planning, implementation, and management of a program. This allows us to bring together and weigh the sometimes-differing viewpoints and perspectives of various stakeholders. A group effort may also do much to ensure that the final products, the outcome objectives themselves, enjoy the more or less unanimous support of those who may be important to

the program's success. Building such support can be particularly important for programs with many relatively distinct objectives, each of which might be seen as more or less relevant or important by different stakeholders. The priority of these various objectives must be established and agreed upon if they are to serve as effective guides to planning, implementation, and evaluation. In addition, there needs to be some measure of consensus regarding what will signal success. Stakeholders need to agree on what it is they expect will change as a result of program efforts, when that change can be reasonably expected to emerge, and how much change is "enough" to conclude that efforts were successful. Good outcome objectives share particular characteristics and are often referred to using the acronym "SMART" - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-limited. As you work toward the development of your outcome objectives, ask yourself the following questions to ensure they are SMART objectives.

## 1. Are your outcome objectives Specific?

When we form an expectation, we do so with the view that we might later judge if the result of some course of action was worthwhile or sufficient to justify the effort. If that expectation is too vague, its usefulness as a starting point for evaluation decreases and its worth in helping to guide or direct our efforts diminishes. For example, let's presume that you have resolved to be a better person in the coming year. When the year comes to a close, your success will, in all likelihood, remain somewhat in doubt. What exactly did you mean by "better"? How much better did you expect to be? Moreover, your resolution provides you with very little guidance regarding what you should be doing to bring about this outcome.

To be of real value, our outcome objectives need to be as specific as possible. They need to specify as clearly as possible what it is that we expect to change as a result of our program, and in what direction that change might occur. Most often this will be a change in some behaviour or condition viewed to be causally implicated in rates of tobacco consumption, exposure to second-hand smoke and, more ultimately, in the occurrence of tobacco-related illness. For example:

- A decrease in the proportion of retailers in the city of Ottawa who sell tobacco to underage youth;
- An increase in the number of workplaces in Simcoe County that are smoke-free;
- A decrease in the proportion of post-secondary students who smoke.

Sometimes shorter-term outcome objectives might be appropriate. These may specify a change that is believed to be a necessary first step, or precondition to more fundamental behavioural change. For example:

- An increase in knowledge of the health effects of second-hand smoke among employers in Windsor-Essex;
- A decrease in the proportion of the adult population of Ontario expressing attitudes that are supportive of smoking.

Wherever possible, outcome objectives should also specify how much change is expected over a particular period. For example, to our bulleted point above about retailer compliance we might add to our objective the stipulation that the proportion of retailers who sell tobacco to youth will decrease to five percent by March 2004. However, estimates of the amount of expected change should not be based on wishful thinking. If a body of literature exists that examines the past successes of similar programs in the same or other jurisdictions, this might provide clues as to the amount of change that can be reasonably expected. If such clues do not exist it may be possible to poll stakeholders to determine what they, as a group, think would be a reasonable or acceptable level of change given the resources available for the program and the circumstances under which it is implemented. In all cases though, where there may be some lingering uncertainty about the amount of change we expect, modesty may indeed be a virtue. Predictions of monumental accomplishments may only be impressive for a short while and, to the extent that actual observed change is substantially less than was predicted, otherwise significant accomplishments may be downplayed or under-valued.

Finally, outcome objectives should also specify exactly who we hope will experience the change that our program is designed to create. In essence, this means that our outcome objectives should specify the target population for our program or intervention. This will not only tell us where we should be looking for change when we evaluate our efforts, but also may help to ensure program efforts are not misdirected during implementation.

## 2. Are your outcome objectives Measurable?

For your outcome objectives to be a useful starting point for evaluation they must refer to measurable outcome dimensions. More specifically, your outcome objectives must refer to observable indicators of program accomplishment. For example, let's say that your desire is to reduce rates of exposure to environmental tobacco smoke. In and of itself it is difficult to see how this might be measured. To create useful outcome objectives this somewhat general notion needs to be *operationalized* by stipulating more tangible and concrete indicators that can be actually observed and counted. Therefore you might conclude that your outcome objective will be to increase the number of workplaces that have implemented and enforced smoke-free policies. This can be measured more or less directly and, to the extent that an increase attributable to your program efforts is observed, it indicates that you have moved toward your more generalized desire.

Questioning whether your outcome objectives are specific will often do a great deal to ensure that they are also measurable. That is, if you follow the suggestion above - clearly specifying exactly what you expect to change within a population as a result of your program - then your outcome objectives will, in all likelihood, be measurable. Still, the issue of whether an outcome objective is measurable must also include some consideration of whether it will be practical and/or possible to measure a particular dimension. Sometimes, even though an outcome indicator is measurable, the actual techniques and strategies required may require time and resources simply not available to you. This may be particularly likely where programs target large populations and measurement of change in that population is not a practical option. Measurement restrictions are also a concern where programs target special populations that are difficult to access, where language or cultural barriers exist, or where ethical concerns regarding data collection are at issue. Where an outcome objective is deemed largely "not measurable" on such grounds, it may be necessary to seek other indicators of success. These indicators may well come before or after those that cannot be measured, or they may outline evidence of success available at different "levels of analysis" (e.g., community-level indicators).

## 3. Are your outcome objectives Achievable?

If you can answer yes to each of the two questions above, you will already have done much to ensure that your outcome objectives are achievable and realistic. Nonetheless, it is worth considering more directly if it is truly reasonable to expect your program to accomplish the sorts of things suggested in those outcome objectives. Is the intervention you are planning really likely to bring about the kind of change suggested? Are your project activities planned, and can they be implemented, in a manner that can really bring you to the kinds of outcomes you desire. Despite what past experience tells us of the efficacy of such programs, are there factors or barriers that exist in your jurisdiction that may limit or reduce success?

Apart from stipulating the kinds of outcomes that are achievable and realistic, it is important to again ask if the amount of change you have predicted is reasonable. Above, it was suggested that the amount of change predicted by an outcome objective should not be based on wishful thinking, but on the best evidence available regarding what might be realistic expectations for a particular type of project. In addition, all claims of the amount of change to be expected must take full account of the practical constraints that may be introduced. Is it reasonable, despite what may have been achieved by similar projects, to expect that your project, given its particular timeframe or available resources, will produce the amount of change you are proposing?

#### 4. Are your outcome objectives Relevant?

Imagine drafting outcome objectives, laying them out before stakeholders, and having them respond with a resounding "so what?" To be relevant and meaningful, your outcome objectives must stipulate accomplishments logically and/or empirically linked to your goal. Stakeholders, including you, must have some reason to believe that what comes to be reported as program accomplishments represents changes that are reasonably likely to lead to more important impacts. In addition, outcome objectives may be greeted with a "so what" if they speak only of what you propose to do to people, and not of the desired or presumed effect of what you propose to do to them. Said differently, outcome objectives that talk exclusively of the activities that a program hopes to implement may fail to make clear what those activities are meant to produce and provide little guidance regarding what may be appropriate and meaningful indicators of outcome.

One way to help ensure that outcome objectives are relevant is to include in your program planning efforts the development of a program logic model. This model will help to illustrate to all stakeholders, including you, how program activities are presumed to be linked to ultimate outcomes through a series of logical steps that will unfold over time. At the same time, the model will help you to identify critical "evaluation points" that will emerge during the program's development and implementation and the sorts of outcome objectives that may be appropriate and relevant for any particular period. Just as important, a program logic model, employed as a guide to implementation, can help you to avoid allocating energy and resources to activities that are tangential to your overall goals. To the extent that this may be true, the model will help to avoid the stipulation of outcome objectives that others may see as largely unimportant in relation to the program's stated goal.

Your outcome objectives may also fail the "so what" test if they stipulate an expected amount or level of change that stakeholders judge to be inconsequential or simply not worth the effort and expense required to create it. Where this may be the case, the solution is not to simply increase your estimate. Instead, you may need to reconsider the more fundamental elements of what it is that you propose to do with your tobacco control dollars. Are there other things you could do with available resources that would seem to promise more meaningful returns? Are there ways you could tweak your plans, say through additional recruitment or promotional efforts, so that you might reasonably increase your estimate of the amount of outcome to be expected? Still, there are seldom clear rules about how much change is enough. Decisions will emerge from an informal cost-benefit analysis, including opportunity costs that might productively include input from key stakeholders before substantial effort is turned to implementing program plans.

Odd though it may seem at first, there may well be times when programs propose that participating members of the target population will experience considerable change as a result of exposure, but may nonetheless receive a "so what" from stakeholders with respect to their outcome objectives. Where this happens in public health, and by extension in tobacco control, it is often because the program, as proposed, will reach so few of the larger population of potential targets that the overall impact on the behaviour of this latter group, and ultimately on public health, is likely to be negligible. This introduces the notion of "public health impact" wherein the impact of a program is seen as a function of its efficacy to bring about sought after change in treated targets multiplied by its reach (i.e., the proportion of potential targets that are actually reached by or exposed to program activities). Where public health impact is identified as a priority, program proposals and outcome objectives that reflect a desire to maximize reach may, other things being equal, be less likely to elicit a "so what."

#### 5. Are your outcome objectives Time-limited?

As suggested earlier, good outcome objectives should specify a time frame for proposed accomplishments. Many stakeholders may expect and deserve to know how long it may be before outcomes emerge. For program managers and staff, specifying a time frame will help to ensure that all stakeholders have a shared understanding

of what is expected to be done over a given period and when it may be reasonable to call for an accounting of the kinds of outcomes proposed.

For many programs, the appropriate time frame within which to cast outcome objectives may correspond to the period for which funding is available. For many others though, and particularly those for which ultimate outcomes suggest a fairly long-term endeavour, it may be reasonable, appropriate and wise to take stock of progress at particular intervals. Here it is often useful for managers and sponsors to share an understanding of appropriate interim or short-term outcome objectives. While the ultimate objectives remain the primary rationale for program efforts, these short-term objectives will help to clarify for all stakeholders the sorts of accomplishments and progress that might be expected in, for example, the next twelve months. To the extent that these accomplishments are linked in a reasonable and defensible way to ultimate outcomes, this ongoing accounting of progress, or lack of progress as the case may be, will provide the justification required to either stay the course or pursue some new direction.

While there are no hard and fast rules, for tobacco control programs that are more or less ongoing efforts, long-term objectives might be seen as the kinds of accomplishments that would begin to emerge in some observable measure five or more years down the road. In contrast, short-term objectives would stipulate accomplishments expected in the next 12 to 24 months and intermediate objectives, accomplishments expected to emerge 2 to 4 years hence.

## Some Examples

You're planning an initiative to reduce youth access to tobacco. As one component of the project you hope to educate retailers about relevant sections of the Tobacco Control Act, and provide them resources they can use to ensure their employees are in compliance. Your most recent compliance data suggests that just prior to the project's start on April 1, 2004, 19% of retailers were willing to sell tobacco to minors. A SMART outcome objective for this component of your project might look like this:

- To decrease to 10% by March 31, 2005, the proportion of tobacco retailers in the city of Yourtown who are willing to sell tobacco products to minors.

You're alarmed to discover that 28% of young people aged 14 to 17 years in your region report that they smoke daily. You undertake a comprehensive, multi-year project targeting young people aged 10 to 13 years to prevent smoking initiation and to encourage and support cessation among those who may have already started to smoke. The project is to launch on April 1, 2004, and run through March 31, 2008. A key SMART outcome objective for the project might look like this:

- To decrease to 18% by March 31, 2008, the proportion of young people aged 14 to 17 years living in the Region of Yourtown who report daily smoking.

## And Finally...

As suggested throughout, outcome objectives form the foundation for outcome evaluation (i.e., the assessment of the extent to which your program has brought about the kind of change within the target population that you had hoped it would). This should not, however, be taken to mean that you do not need to concern yourself with formulating outcome objectives unless or until you are preparing to conduct an outcome evaluation. The importance of outcome objectives, and the very process of creating them relates to the earliest phases of program planning and implementation, as part of the discussion above illustrates.

Nor should it be taken to mean that the only worthwhile or appropriate evaluation activities are assessments of outcome. Often it is reasonable and appropriate to conduct evaluations solely for the purposes of documenting what you have done over a particular period, rather than to document the results of what you have done. Here the objectives guiding your evaluation might be called operational or implementation objectives, not outcome objectives. Still, good outcome objectives, derived during the early phases of program planning, are fundamental tools to assist program managers, staff, and sponsors to know where efforts are headed and when they might be expected to arrive. And where outcome evaluation is deemed appropriate or necessary, good outcome objectives will form a vital starting point.

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This update was prepared by Mike Hayes under the auspices of OTRU's Monitoring and Evaluation Workgroup.