

LEARNING OBJECTIVES SHOULDN'T BE OBJECTIONABLE



If I were to be brutally honest, I'd have to admit to a conflicted relationship with learning objectives. My earliest instructional design training established these as the non-negotiable cornerstones of any development effort. And I dutifully began each project accordingly.

But over the years, a few things began happening that conspired to undermine this commitment to learning objectives. First, what started out as a straightforward task became increasingly convoluted as terms and permutations on the idea evolved. Learning outcomes. Performance standards. Conditions and criterion. Cognitive outcomes. Behavioral objectives. Affective outcomes. It all started to feel complex and over-engineered.

Add to this the evolving speed of business. Business cycles have shrunk dramatically. Strategic plans – once laid out for five, 10 or 15 years – now operate in months. Regular and rapid innovation are table stakes for staying in the game. And the half-life of technical skills has become shorter, demanding more and faster training than ever before.

This accelerating pace and the need for learning and development to keep up with – if not get ahead of – the business curve exacerbates our natural bias for action. By the time a training need emerges, it means that someone somewhere is already falling short of what's needed, and that vital work is not being addressed appropriately.

And finally, in today's information-rich environment with such a focus on microlearning, it's all too easy to forget

about learning outcomes altogether. With nearly unlimited resources just a click away, it's tempting to get to the fun work of curating content around topics with little regard for how those topics must be applied within the context of the learner's job.

A THOUGHTFUL LEARNING OBJECTIVE CAN INFORM AND SERVE MANY PURPOSES.

And so, I've come to the conclusion that it's precisely because of these pressures and the pace that learning objectives may be more important today than ever before. We can't afford to lose valuable time developing training that doesn't deliver results. Slowing down really can help us go faster in the long-run.

Articulating the 'destination' is the first step in heading down a focused and productive path. And learning outcomes can define the destination. What's needed today is something more agile and actionable than what might have served us in the past. But this requires that we think and approach things a little differently.

No more splitting hairs. Let's worry less about what we call these things and more about how to transform them into powerful tools that support development and learning. And while the words on the page are helpful, they are less important than the quality of the conversations you have with learners, their managers, stakeholders and SMEs. The first step

is for learning professionals to deeply understand the audience and internalize business needs and the changes that are required. Once that happens, objectives become your guardrails and guideposts for action ... and a lot less 'objectionable.'

Substance over syntax. Frequently when it comes to crafting objectives, we focus too much attention on the vocabulary (what's the right verb form) versus the value that objectives can offer. We make it formulaic rather than building a framework that works as hard as you do at guiding development efforts and participant learning. It boils down to defining what people need to do and what they need to know. Keep it that simple. Keep the list short enough that it's doable. Tailor it to what makes sense for you, the content and the learners.

Make objectives work. Creating objectives shouldn't be something you complete, cross off the list, and tuck away. Make your investment pay off beyond your development effort. Use what you put together to socialize the learning effort with executives and others. Incorporate the text into descriptions and invitations. Leverage it for evaluation and assessment instruments. Consider incorporating it into the performance appraisal process. A thoughtful learning objective can inform and serve many purposes. 🔄

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