Objectives and Key Results (OKRs)

Objectives and Key Results (OKRs) provide a mission-focused goal-setting framework that creates alignment, focus, and stretch thinking throughout nonprofit organizations and educational institutions. While originally popularized in the tech sector, OKRs have been successfully adapted to mission-driven contexts where impact measurement extends beyond financial metrics. This framework connects ambitious, qualitative objectives with specific, measurable key results that track progress toward your mission, helping teams balance aspirational goals with concrete outcomes.

Author

This tool was developed by Michelle Watson-Grant.

Goal

To establish clear direction, create alignment across departments and stakeholders, encourage ambitious thinking about mission advancement, and drive measurable impact through a simple yet powerful goal-setting methodology adapted for mission-driven organizations.

Advice

OKRs work best in nonprofit and education settings when:

- Setting seasonal or annual priorities (aligned with academic years or grant cycles)
- Connecting program activities to broader mission outcomes
- Encouraging ambitious thinking about social impact
- Creating transparency around priorities and progress for staff, board members, and funders
- Driving measurable outcomes from strategic initiatives while respecting the complexity of social change

Objectives and Key Results (OKRs)

Advice, cont'd

Implement OKRs on a cycle that aligns with your natural planning periods (semester, academic year, or grant cycle). Limit objectives to 3-5 per department to prevent dilution of effort. Remember that OKRs should be transparent across the organization and with key stakeholders to promote alignment and collective impact.
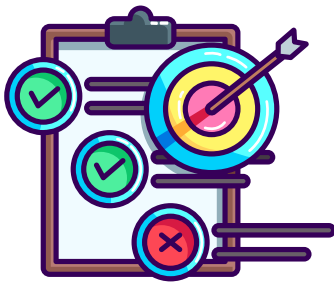
Objectives

- Qualitative, inspiring statements of what you want to achieve that connect to your mission
- Express ambitious goals that push the team beyond business-as-usual while respecting resource constraints
- Should be memorable, motivational, and directly tied to your organization's purpose
- Limited to 3-5 per department or program per planning cycle to maintain focus

Key Results

- Quantifiable metrics that measure progress toward the objective
- 2-5 key results per objective balancing output, outcome, and sometimes process metrics
- Binary (achieved/not achieved) or scaled (0-1.0) measurement
- Specific, time-bound, ambitious yet realistic within resource constraints
- May include both short-term indicators and longer-term impact measures

Crafting Effective Mission-Driven Objectives:

Characteristics of Strong Objectives:

✅ Connected to organization mission and theory of change

✅ Directional and action-oriented

✅ Concise and memorable

✅ Inspirational and meaningful to staff, board, and constituents

✅ Challenging but achievable within resource constraints

➡️ **Objective Writing Formula:** Verb + What + Clarifier (connecting to mission)

Common Mistakes to Avoid:

🚫 Process-focused objectives that don't connect to mission impact

🚫 Overly technical or jargon-filled language that doesn't inspire

🚫 Vague statements without clear direction

🚫 Too many objectives creating program fragmentation

🚫 Objectives disconnected from organizational theory of change

Examples of Objectives in Nonprofits and Education

Examples for Nonprofit Leaders:
- "Transform our volunteer program to create sustainable community engagement"
- "Establish our advocacy program as the leading voice for housing equity in the region"
- "Create an inclusive support system that empowers first-generation college students"
- "Build organizational capacity to double our program impact with current resources"
- "Develop a collaborative service model that addresses root causes of food insecurity"

Examples for Education Leaders:
- "Create an equitable learning environment where every student can thrive"
- "Transform our STEM curriculum to inspire the next generation of innovative thinkers"
- "Build a professional development system that empowers teachers as instructional leaders"
- "Establish our school as a community hub for whole-family support"
- "Develop a culturally responsive approach to student assessment and growth"

Crafting Effective Mission-Driven Key Results:

Characteristics of Strong Nonprofit/Education Key Results:

- Specific and measurable, even for complex social outcomes

- Balanced between outputs (what you do) and outcomes (what changes)

- Ambitious yet achievable with available resources

- Time-bound to match realistic change timelines

- Evidence-based and verifiable through available data systems
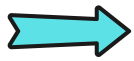
Key Result Writing Formula: Metric + From X to Y + By When

Common Mistakes to Avoid:

Activity-based measures that don't connect to meaningful change

Unmeasurable or overly subjective criteria

Metrics without available data collection systems

Setting targets too low or impossibly high given resources

Focusing only on easily measured outputs while ignoring meaningful outcomes

Examples of Key Results in Nonprofits and Education

Examples for Nonprofit Leaders:
- "Increase monthly volunteer retention rate from 45% to 75% by end of fiscal year"
- "Engage 500 community members in advocacy training, with 80% taking at least one advocacy action by June"
- "Increase college persistence rate among program participants from 65% to 85% by next academic year"
- "Expand service delivery from 1,200 to 2,000 clients while maintaining quality score above 4.5/5 by Q4"
- "Reduce average time to stable housing for program participants from 90 days to 45 days by December"

Examples for Education Leaders:
- "Increase student reading proficiency from 68% to 85% by end of academic year"
- "Reduce chronic absenteeism from 18% to 8% by semester end"
- "Improve teacher retention rate from 75% to 90% year-over-year"
- "Engage 90% of families in at least three meaningful school activities by year-end, up from current 60%"
- "Increase number of students demonstrating growth mindset from 45% to 80% by end of spring semester"

People-Centered OKR Development Process for Mission-Driven Organizations:

Step 1 - Stakeholder Engagement & Listening

- Begin by engaging diverse voices including staff, board members, constituents, and community partners
- Conduct listening sessions to understand needs, aspirations, and challenges from multiple perspectives
- Gather input on what success looks like from those you serve
- Create safe spaces for honest feedback about organizational strengths and growth areas
- Document themes and priorities emerging from constituent perspectives

Step 2 - Mission and Value Alignment

- Review organizational mission, vision, and theory of change through a stakeholder lens
- Map stakeholder input against your organization's core values and principles
- Identify areas where constituent priorities and organizational capabilities intersect
- Consider equity implications and power dynamics in potential focus areas
- Develop shared understanding of how progress will benefit those you serve

People-Centered OKR Development Process for Mission-Driven Organizations:

Step 3 - Collaborative Objective Development

- Facilitate inclusive brainstorming sessions with representative stakeholders
- Co-create potential objectives based on identified priorities
- Evaluate each option based on mission alignment, constituent benefit, and feasibility
- Select 3-5 objectives that honor diverse stakeholder input while maintaining focus
- Refine language for clarity, inspiration, and authentic connection to stakeholder needs

Step 4 - Participatory Key Result Development

- For each objective, collaboratively identify what meaningful progress looks like
- Establish current baseline metrics with input from those closest to the work
- Co-determine ambitious but achievable targets considering available resources
- Ensure measures reflect what matters most to constituents, not just what's easy to count
- Balance quantitative metrics with qualitative feedback mechanisms

People-Centered OKR Development Process for Mission-Driven Organizations:
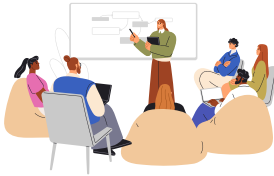
Step 5 - Resource & Capacity Assessment

- Honestly evaluate organizational capacity to pursue the draft OKRs
- Identify resource needs and potential constraints with staff input
- Assess potential unintended consequences or burdens on specific teams or constituents
- Make necessary adjustments to scope or timeline based on capacity realities
- Develop supportive strategies to help teams succeed with available resources

Step 6 - Communication & Shared Ownership

- Share final OKRs transparently across the organization and with key stakeholders
- Clearly articulate how stakeholder input influenced the chosen priorities
- Connect individual roles to OKR achievement through meaningful dialogue
- Establish shared ownership and collective responsibility for outcomes
- Create accessible ways to communicate progress to all stakeholders, including those served

People-Centered OKR Development Process for Mission-Driven Organizations:

Step 7 - Inclusive Progress Reviews

- Conduct regular check-ins with diverse stakeholder representation
- Create psychologically safe spaces to discuss challenges and learnings
- Gather ongoing feedback from those experiencing the work
- Celebrate early wins and acknowledge contributors across levels
- Make adaptive adjustments based on evolving stakeholder needs

Step 8 - Reflective Evaluation & Learning

- Evaluate progress through both metrics and stakeholder experiences
- Create reflective spaces for honest assessment of what worked and what didn't
- Gather direct feedback from those impacted by the work
- Document learning for future planning cycles
- Express gratitude to all who contributed to progress
- Use insights to inform the next cycle of people-centered OKRs

Example OKR Set for a Nonprofit Organization (Youth Development Program):

OBJECTIVE 1: Transform our mentoring program to create sustainable pathways to college for under-served youth

Key Results:

1. Increase college application rate among program participants from 65% to 95% by June
2. Improve mentor retention from average of 8 months to 18 months by program year-end
3. Achieve 85% of mentees reporting increased confidence in college readiness, up from 60% currently
4. Establish partnerships with 5 new colleges offering priority admission and support services by Q3

Example OKR Set for an Educational Institution (K-12 School):

OBJECTIVE 1: Create an equitable math learning environment where every student develops confidence and competence

Key Results:

1. Increase mathematics proficiency rates from 72% to 90% by end of academic year
2. Close the achievement gap between student subgroups by reducing disparity from 28% to 10% by year-end
3. Improve student self-reported math confidence from average score of 3.2 to 4.5 (on 5-point scale) by semester end
4. Increase percentage of students pursuing advanced math courses from 35% to 60% by registration period