

## Learner Outcomes PMM5 Postscript™ Number 31

**Background Information:** In *Professional Meeting Management*®, fifth edition, Brian Miller and Glen Ramsborg state that meeting managers should be able to develop learning objectives. Most organizations view education as a key component of their meetings. In Chapter 20, Mille and Ramsborg:

- Differentiate among the three domains of learning
- Apply the concept of learning domains in writing learner outcomes
- List verbs that clearly define a good learner outcome
- Compare learner outcomes and program objectives
- Describe how to incorporate learning outcomes into planning a program

**PMM5 Postscriptä Use:** Learner outcomes are the roadmap that helps meeting managers, participants, speakers, sponsors and other meeting stakeholders focus on the desired result from a meeting. Learner outcomes impose a focus, clarity and discipline on meeting content so that all energy is channeled in the right direction. This PMM5 Postscript™ further explains how learner outcomes can be applied for all types meetings. This PMM5 Postscript™ also includes additional group discussion or research projects to supplement the PMM5 chapter

**Learner Outcomes:** At the completion of this reading, you should be able to:

- Describe why all meetings have an element of learning.
- List at least four other “names” for learner outcomes.
- Define the difference between an objective and outcome.
- Identify the four elements in a learner outcome.
- List good and bad verbs for use in learner outcomes.
- Re-write weak learner outcomes into better statements.

**Related PMM5 Chapter:** Chapter 20, Writing Effective Learner Outcomes  
Authors: Glen Ramsborg PhD and Brian Miller



## Where does Learning Occur

For many meetings, the concept of learner outcomes may seem far removed and totally unrelated. After all, what role do learner objectives play in incentive meetings? Committee meetings? Staff meetings?

Educational psychologists define learning as a "change in behavior." Webster's Dictionary defines learning as "To come to be able and to realize." Learning is a change in the way people feel, think or behave. When adapting these definitions and not focusing on learning as training, all meetings are about learning. Meetings are held to change what people know, what they do and how they feel.

Whether a meeting is:

- Providing information
- Creating ideas
- Deciding on issues
- Delegating
- Sharing work
- Persuading, involving or inspiring
- Maintaining relationships
- Celebrating

the core reason for the meeting can be attributed to changing how or what people

**Know**  
**Feel**  
**Do**

During an incentive trip, the sponsoring stakeholder strives to have the recipients "learn" the message of how the recipients are to the organization. During an incentive trip, the sponsoring stakeholder wants to have recipients feel important and special. And ultimately, incentive trips are designed so that people repeat their behavior in the future and create top-notch results for the organization again.

## By any Other Name a Rose is a Rose...

Meeting managers or stakeholders may not recognize learner outcomes by that name. People and organizations may prefer terms like:

- Outcomes
- Learning objectives
- Enabling objectives
- Educational objectives
- Curriculum objectives
- Performance objectives
- Operational objectives
- Instructional objectives
- Intents
- Aims
- Competencies

The nomenclature or terminology is less important than it is for meetings to have clearly defined learner outcomes. Meeting managers can either adapt existing organizational vocabulary or they can influence the organization to adapt the term *outcomes*.

### The Difference between Outcomes and Objectives

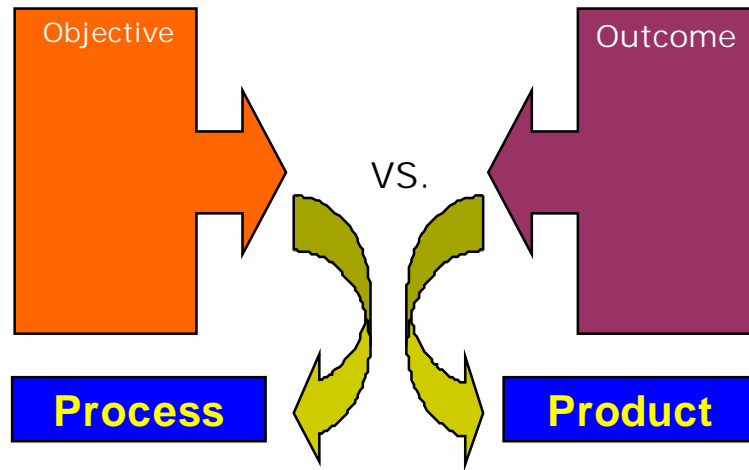
Sometimes the terms *objectives* and *outcomes* are used interchangeably. In fact, the inventory of terms above lists *learning objectives* as a synonym for *outcomes*. Within this PMM5 Postscript™ the terms have a distinct but often subtle difference in meaning.

Objectives:

- Are clear statements that describe intended outcomes of a meeting
- Amplify goals and translate them into action
- Focus attention on the specific types of performances that participants are expected to demonstrate following educational sequences

Outcomes:

- Are achieved results
- Define the end product



(Diagram taken from PCMA, Learning Environmental Specialist training program)

Therefore, objectives are statements that communicate intent. Objective gives direction. Objectives guide the process. Learning objectives are a much broader performance statement. In comparison, outcomes are the end products of instruction for a learning activity. Outcome is the destination.

Objectives guide the development of a meeting or program. The intended audience (or user) for objectives is a speaker or presenter. Outcomes define what the meeting audience will leave with. The intended audience for outcomes is the meeting participants. Outcomes answer the question of why participants are attending the meeting.

## Why are Learner Outcomes Necessary?

The primary purpose of establishing learner outcomes is to communicate. The purpose and function of learner outcomes:

- Causes careful thinking about what is to be accomplished through meeting program
- Forces presenters and speakers to think carefully about what is important
- Communicates to members and employees what the meeting is about
- Helps attendees make decisions regarding attendance and prioritizing concurrent sessions
- Defines contract between speaker or presenter and audience with explicit expectations and outcomes
- Makes presentations more directed and organized
- Provides feedback to learners as objectives are accomplished.
- Aids in program evaluation

Moreover, learner outcomes also will be (Westberg & Jason 1993):

1. Consistent with overall goals of the organization
2. Clearly stated
3. Realistic and doable
4. Appropriate for people given their knowledge, experience and skill level
5. Appropriately comprehensive
6. Worthy outcomes

## How to Write a Learner Outcome

Writing learner outcomes takes practice. Ramsborg and Miller discuss the principles behind learner outcomes in great detail (Miller & Ramsborg, 2006, pp. 294-298). In addition to being SMART (**S**pecific, **M**asurable, **A**ttainable, **R**elevant, **T**imely), they advance the following additional principles:

- The learning statement describes the end (product).
  - Write a separate statement for each outcome.
  - Write a statement that reflects different levels of skill attainment
  - Start each statement with a concrete action verb
- Attitudes themselves cannot be measured; they can only be inferred from behavior

Another useful tool for writing strong learner outcomes is the A.B.C.D. method (Heinich, et al., 1996). In this system, "A" is for audience; "B" is for behavior, "C" for conditions and "D" for degree of mastery needed.

**Audience** — Who? Who are the learners?

**Behavior** — What? What do you expect them to be able to do? This should be an overt, observable behavior, even if the actual behavior is covert or mental in nature. If you can't see it, hear it, touch it, taste it, or smell it, it is impossible to judge whether the audience really learned it.

**Condition** — How? What is to be learned, mastered or demonstrated? Describes the conditions under which the performance is to be demonstrated. The condition describes a trigger for the desired behavior.

**Degree** — How much? How much will be accomplished, how well will the behavior need to be performed, and to what level? Do you want total mastery (100%), do you want them to respond correctly 80% of the time, etc.

Using the ABCD tool, meeting managers can complete learning outcomes in the following format:

**(Audience)** will be able to **(Action verb or behavior)** **(Condition)** **(Degree)**

**For example,**

**Technicians** will be able to **correctly explain** at **least five basic principles of empathetic communication to handle conflict after attending this workshop.**

It is important to note that many outcomes are written in a manner in which some elements are implicit. Sometimes specific sections are understood in a learning outcome. Often in marketing materials, it is common to omit sections of a learning outcome. This is acceptable as long as complete learning outcomes underlie the actual meeting.

Example: You will be able to name the five stages in employee coaching.

Versus

The participant will correctly name the five stages in employee coaching within 30 seconds after participating in the meeting.

### Twist my Words: Verbs to Use (and avoid)

We all learned in elementary school that a verb is an action word. In a learning outcome, the verb is also an action word but with a small twist. The verb in a learning objective is an action word that connotes an observable behavior. For example, although we may want our participants to appreciate one thing or another, it is impossible to see when they "appreciate" something. Understand is another over-used word that describes best intentions but doesn't result in any observable behavior.

Use verbs such as *identify*, *name*, and *describe* because anyone can observe the act or product of identifying, naming, or describing. Words or phrases such as *know*, *think*, *appreciate*, *realize*, *learn*, *comprehend*, *remember*, *perceive*, *understand*, *study*, *be aware of*, *be familiar with*, *have knowledge of*, *grasp the significance*, *cover*, *gain knowledge of*, *become acquainted with* are **not** measurable and should be avoided. Refer to PCMA's Action Verbs™ for more examples of verbs that are effective in building learner outcomes.

### Typical Problems with Learner Outcomes

Four types of problems typically occur when writing learner outcomes. This analysis is adapted from the Penn State Teaching and Learning through Technology website on *How to Write Clear Objectives*:

Problems	Error Types	Solutions
<b>Too vast/complex</b>	The objective is too broad in scope or is actually more than one objective.	Use the ABCD method to identify each desired behavior or skill in order to break objectives apart.
<b>No behavior to evaluate</b>	Not overt behavior. Many objectives using verbs like "comprehend" or "understand" may not include behaviors to observe.	Determine what actions a meeting participant should demonstrate.
<b>Only topics are listed</b>	Describes instruction, not conditions. Topic-driven but lacks a description of how participants will use the information.	Determine how people should use the information presented. Should it be memorized? Used as background knowledge?
<b>Vague Assignment Outcomes</b>	The objective does not list the correct behavior, condition, and/or degree, or they are missing.	Determine behavior and conditions for meeting participants.

### More Bad Examples

These examples give credence to the difficulty of writing learner objectives and why they often are incorrect.

Understand the rules of logic. (Problem = not-measurable)

**Better:** Describe the six rules of logic.

Perform office functions. (Problem = too broad)

**Better:** Execute word processing and spreadsheet programs at an intermediate skill level including these functions:  
*List functions.....*

Select hand tools and use them to punch, drill, and shape sheet metal. (Problem = more than one skill in a statement)

**Better:** Select the correct hand tool and use to punch sheet metal in under five minutes.  
Select the correct hand tool and use to drill sheet metal in under five minutes  
Select the correct hand tool and use to shape sheet metal in under six minutes.

Demonstrate knowledge of corporate strategy. (Problem = not measurable)

**Better:** List the three corporate initiatives for the current year.

### Meeting Agendas vs. Objectives vs. Outcomes

Fran Rees addresses the difference between agendas and objectives: "Simply speaking, objectives are focused, agendas are not. Objectives define the desired outcome of the meeting; agendas define only the topics to be covered. An objective gives teams and groups something to strive for; agendas give them something to endure. Objectives call for active participation; agendas permit passivity." (Rees, 1991).

While an agenda is a necessary ingredient for a meeting, an agenda is not sufficient. The elements of an agenda: list of topics to be covered, a time schedule, and the name of the presenter for each item do not convey desired outcomes for the meeting.

Add outcomes and turn an agenda into a flow of activities that the team or group will take part in to accomplish the objectives and create the desired outcomes.

Rees provides a sample meeting agenda with its supporting outcomes:

Our objective for today's meeting is to decide which one of the three alternative data-base management systems best meets our established criteria. The agenda for the meeting will be:

- 9:00 Review criteria. Make necessary changes.
- 9:30 Discuss pros and cons of each system in relation to criteria.
- 10:00 Plot decision grid. Rank choices.
- 10:30 Discuss top-ranked choice. Weigh against criteria. Decide on system.

### **Non-Training Meetings Learner Outcomes**

Training meetings — based on their content — may seem easier to arrive at learning outcomes. However, all meetings that have a message or a call to action have related meeting outcomes. Consider how various meetings can still benefit from the clarity of learner outcomes.

The examples below are various types of meetings. Each meeting can have learner outcomes that begins, "By attending this meeting, the participant will be able to:

#### **Meeting: Communication meetings**

1. Explain the four key strategies for the firm
2. Outline four barriers and enablers to implementation of firm strategy
3. List at least four ways to encourage staff communication

#### **Meeting: Coaching and Managing Skills**

1. List three approaches to problem solving
2. Construct staff assignments based on input from staff
3. Evaluate two coaching approaches

#### **Meeting Topic: Teamwork**

1. Identify four characteristics of an effective team
2. Describe five skills managers can use to foster commitment and collaboration
3. Develop at least five guidelines for helping colleagues learn from each other

Spending the time up-front crafting strong learner outcomes will greatly assist in evaluating a meeting's impact.

## Evaluation

How does a meeting manager know when a meeting is successful? Evaluation enables meeting managers to close the loop between outcomes and actual results. For every meeting, part of the planning process is to work through the seven steps of evaluation:

1. Define measurable outcomes
2. Develop a measurement plan
3. Create instruments to capture data
4. Capture data
5. Tabulate results
6. Perform analysis
7. Present the information

*Professional Meeting Management*®, fifth edition, devotes an entire chapter to evaluation (Chapter 45). PMM5 Postscript™ Number 51 also supplements the topic of evaluation.

The evaluation process need not be onerous or laborious. A post-event survey or evaluation forms on-site are the most common methods for capturing data. The key for meeting managers is to ask questions that evaluate the outcomes that were established and acquire data related to the contract between the audience and the speakers.

## Summary

Piper is cited in *Professional Meeting Management*®, fifth edition, where he offers two critical reasons why outcomes should be used in planning educational activities: “Before you can tell whether you’re getting the results you want, you need to know how you will judge success when you see it,” and “If you know your ‘destination’, you can make better decisions about how to get there.” (Miller & Ramsborg, 2006).

Creating learning outcomes is a discipline that will serve meeting manager, stakeholders and participants. Defining measurable outcomes is part of a needs assessment or discovery process. Without concrete outcomes it is impossible to design, plan or even justify a meeting.

For those reasons, it is important that meeting managers establish meeting outcomes jointly with stakeholders for all meetings. Outcomes will create clarity, focus, accountability and serve as a basis for evaluating results.

## Group Discussion or Projects

1. If the learner outcomes are “fuzzy”, what are the potential consequences?
2. How would you respond if someone argued that defining outcomes will restrict the spontaneity or constrain the vision of a meeting?

3. If an organization is focused on developing leadership and management skills, how could you construct learner outcomes to support this objective? Fill in an action verb for each learner outcome.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ key resource requirements, including team members and budget
  - \_\_\_\_\_ detailed plan of action within 45 days of the workshop
  - \_\_\_\_\_ a new communications approach to deal effectively with team members
4. Outcomes provide a basis for participant accountability, during and after a meeting. How does this affect the meeting? How does it affect a meeting manager and their job?
5. Construct better learner outcome based on one of the following incorrectly written outcomes:
  - Understand good strategic thinking and planning skills
  - Be an agent of change
  - Cover good planning skills
6. Evaluate the learner outcomes at the beginning of the PMM5 Postscript™? Did they reflect the content? How could you improve them or supplement the listed outcomes?

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