



The Asana Playbook to OKRs

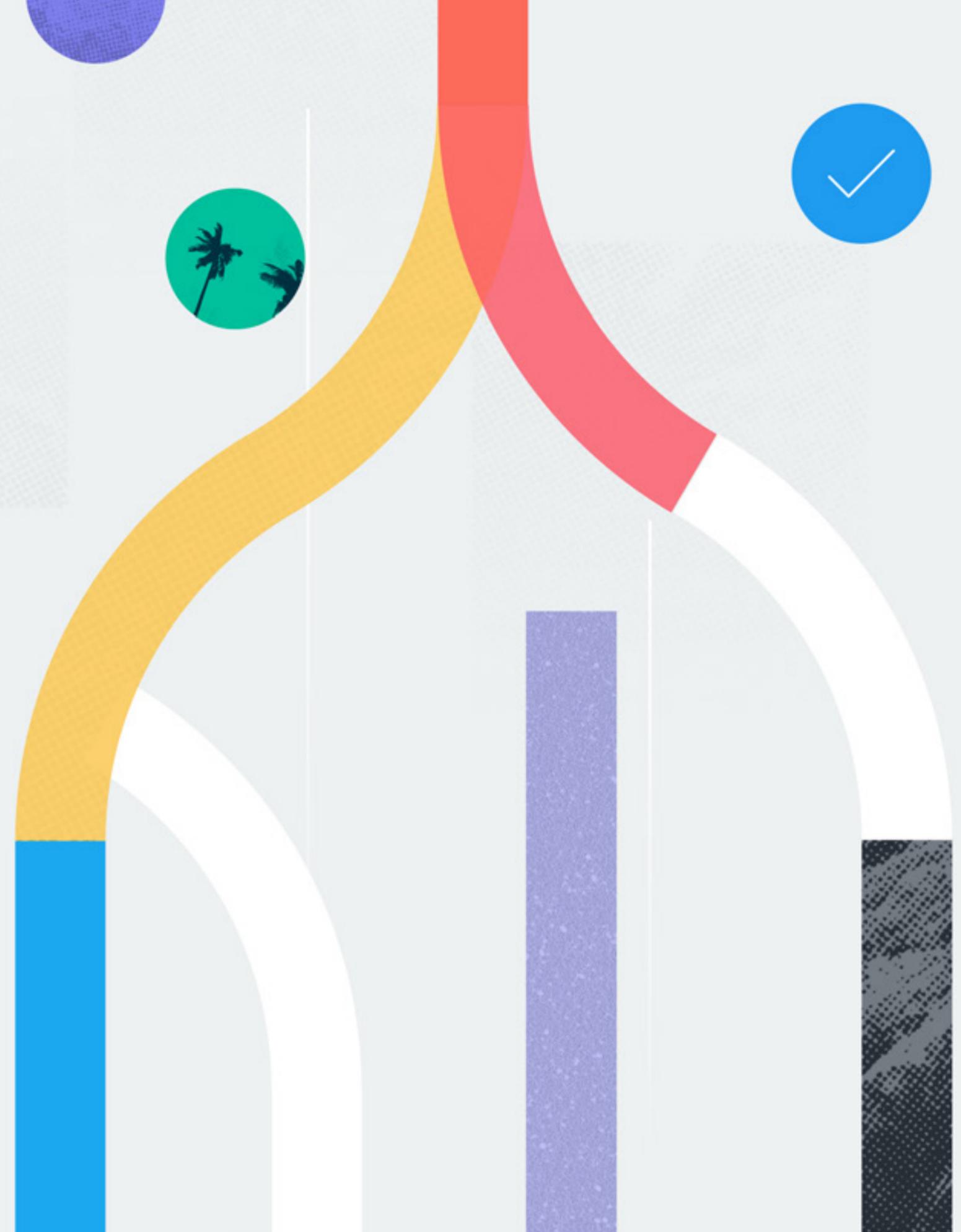
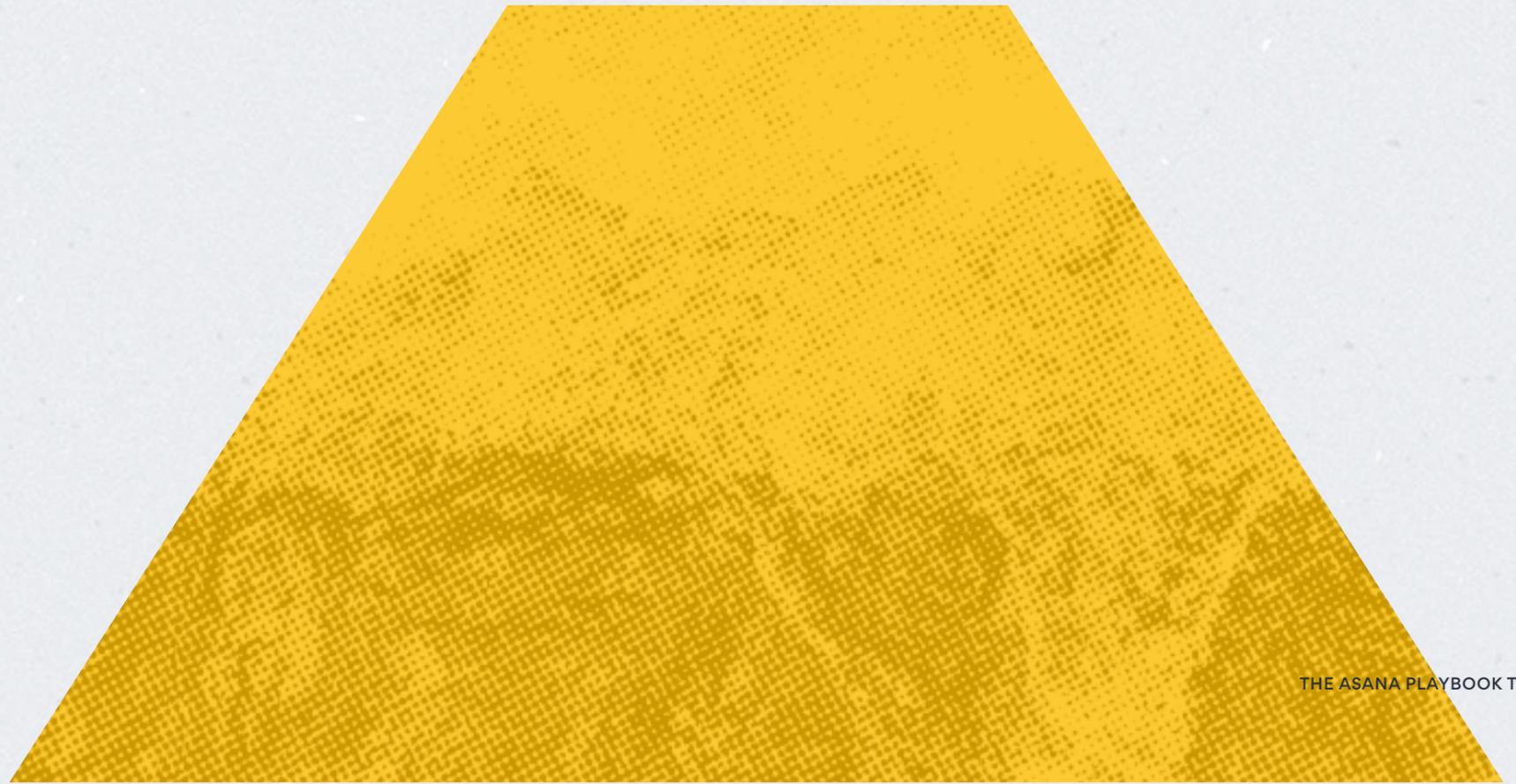
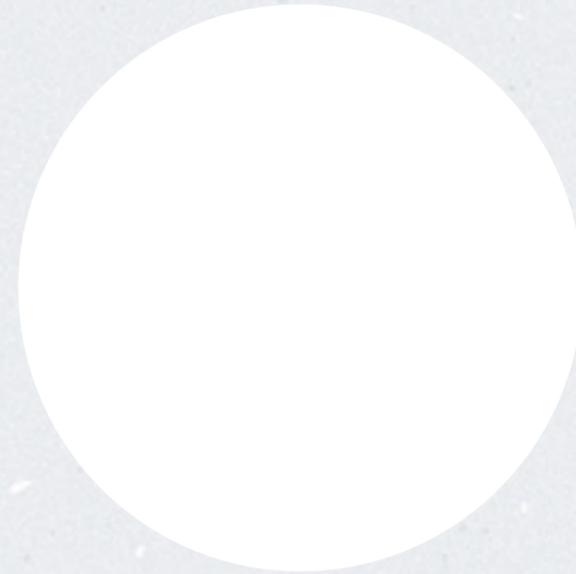


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01

What are OKRs?



In the fall of 1979, Intel president Andy Grove faced a huge challenge. The Santa Clara-based tech company was falling behind its competitors and deals were evaporating into thin air. Its main competitor, Motorola, had just launched an innovative new microprocessor and Intel's sales leaders became worried as they watched it quickly take over the market.

Grove knew he needed to make some radical changes if the company was to survive. And he needed to start at the top.

Intel, like most companies at the time, were adherents to a “top-down” management system that had dominated the business world since the Industrial Revolution. Managers told their teams what to do and their employees executed those instructions exactly as told. That approach worked for factory assembly lines, but it didn't make sense at Intel, a company that traded on innovation and creativity.

Grove ripped up the old-school management rule book and set out to design a new goal-setting methodology from scratch. He called it Intel Management by Objectives. The name was later simplified to Objectives and Key Results—better known today as OKRs.

It worked on the revolutionary idea that teams perform better by focusing on outcomes, not procedure. Instead of telling Intel's employees precisely what to do, he'd set them a goal and let them work out how to achieve them.

The change lit a rocket under the troubled company. During Grove's 19-year tenure at the helm, Intel went from industry laggard to trailblazing icon, increasing its revenues from \$1.9 billion to \$26 billion in the process.

Grove taught his OKR system to hundreds of people at Intel, including John Doerr, who famously codified his work and transported it to the rest of Silicon Valley. There, it spread like wildfire.

In his book *Measure What Matters*, Doerr distilled Grove's ideology to one simple template:

I will [objective] as measured by [key result].

The objective is the goal you want to achieve and the key result is the metric by which you'll measure your progress.

It's a simple but immensely flexible template that bends and bows to fit nearly every purpose. For instance, OKRs have become just as effective at guiding public policy as they are at directing specific projects for a tech startup.



Take the City of Syracuse. Nestled in the rolling hills of Upstate New York, the city uses OKRs to drive its financial and social developments:

OBJECTIVE

Increase economic investment and neighborhood stability.

KEY RESULT 1

95% of permits and zoning approvals will be issued on time.

KEY RESULT 2

Increase compliance of code violations by the comply by date from 20% to 35%.

KEY RESULT 3

Improve stability in the quality of life pilot area by 20%.

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, language learning app Duolingo uses OKRs to drive much more granular progress:

OBJECTIVE

Make Stories the best product possible.

KEY RESULT 1

Talk to users.

KEY RESULT 2

Understand their pain points.

KEY RESULT 3

Document users' pain points.

OKRs aren't necessarily limited to the workplace. When asked about how he improved his personal life, John Doerr revealed he used his trusty system to maximize the time he spent with his family.

OBJECTIVE

Have more quality family time as measured by:

KEY RESULT 1

Getting home for dinner by 6 pm, 20 nights a month.

KEY RESULT 2

Being present by turning off the internet router to eliminate distractions.

Grove's OKR methodology has underpinned some of the greatest modern companies. While their journey looks simple conceptually, the reality is often a bit cloudier, especially now.

Businesses are more complex and global in scope than they have ever been. Technology is changing rapidly, too, enabling digitally native organizations to disrupt established markets. Changing demographics are forcing companies to transform how they enable and empower an increasingly distributed workforce.

Faced with so much change, we believe there's still a big piece of the puzzle missing: work.

By focusing solely on the goal or destination, OKRs often become detached from day-to-day work, especially when they're rolled out poorly. Instead of being an omnipresent feature in our working lives, they end up locked away in forgotten slide decks and spreadsheets. And when they're out of sight, they're out of mind.

Instead, we think OKRs should be connected to work—the day-to-day tasks and projects that actually drive progress towards our goals. OKRs can deliver incredible benefits to any organization. When OKRs are connected to the work required to achieve them, those benefits are maximized and drive better outcomes.

02

The missing link: Connecting daily work to goals



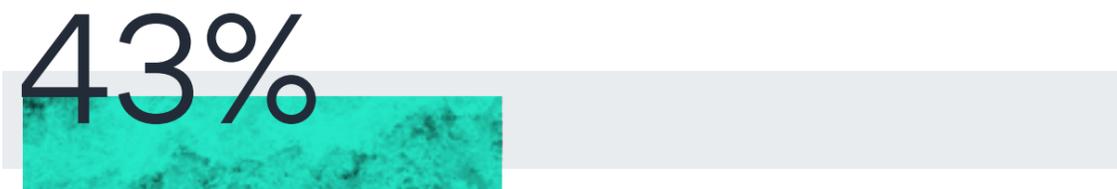
Almost all leaders acknowledge how important mission, objectives, and goals are to their organization. Indeed, a recent report found that some 86% of leaders say defining a purpose is essential to a successful growth strategy. But often leaders misdiagnose the challenge of purpose as solely a communication or transparency problem.

They “solve” the challenge by sharing OKRs at all-hands meetings or including them in company-wide newsletters. Few realize that this doesn’t go far enough. Nudging someone occasionally causes a spark of engagement. For an hour—possibly even a day—they feel a connection to the why behind their work. But eventually, the spark fades and people slip back into a murky work environment where they know what they’re doing, but not why they’re doing it.

This organizational confusion is remarkably common. The Anatomy of Work Index, which surveyed over 10,000 knowledge workers, found that just 43% of people understood their organization’s overarching mission and less than half of all employees understood how their day-to-day work contributed to broader goals.

At Asana, our company mission—enabling the world’s teams to work together effortlessly—is built on our philosophy that having clarity of purpose, plan, and responsibility is what enables teams to do their best work together.

So in order to reap the full benefits of OKRs and drive sustained alignment, goals must be ingrained in our daily work. Otherwise, alignment is happening at a moment in time, removed from when teams are actually executing.



43% of people understood their organization’s overarching mission and less than half of all employees understood how their day-to-day work contributed to broader goals.

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OKRs provide a common goal language and much-needed context for individual contributors to create their task lists each week.

— BEN LAMORTE, OKRS.COM

We believe you can improve OKRs by providing clarity to employees on their goals. This ensures that they can prioritize the work that helps drive progress toward their objectives.

That's the missing link: the connection between what we actually do day to day and why we do it.

But creating that link is easier said than done. For decades, we planned strategic goals and managed work in separate silos. We designed our OKRs in docs and slides and planned our work in email and spreadsheets because those were the tools available to us.

But now, things are different.

New technologies like work management platforms empower teams to do what you couldn't before: connect your day-to-day work to overarching goals. That connection and clarity enables teams to prioritize projects that support their organization's strategy and provide real-time visibility into how they're progressing towards their goals.

When you create a link between your day-to-day work and overarching goals, the why behind every decision and action becomes crystal clear. And it's easier to stay on top of real-time progress or course correct when initiatives are at risk. In doing so, not only is employee engagement and team efficiency improved, but performance measurement becomes real-time and forward-looking.

“

To be effective, all OKR implementations must be software enabled. The number of OKRs and the calculation of performance scores alone calls for software support, but to achieve all the benefits of OKRs, every employee needs to have access to their performance across any technology at any time. Your organization's performance is far too important to risk with manual OKR solutions.

— BRETT KNOWLES, PM2 CONSULTING

03

The benefits of OKRs



Pyramid of Clarity



Thousands of companies, including tech-industry giants like Twitter, Netflix, Microsoft, and Amazon—owe their success to Grove’s revolutionary, results-focused style of management. Google co-founder Larry Page even singled out Grove’s influence as a key factor in his company’s success.

“OKRs have helped lead us to 10x growth, many times over,” wrote Page in Measure What Matters. “They’ve helped make our crazily bold mission of ‘organizing the world’s information’ perhaps even achievable.”

At Asana, Grove’s influence runs strong, although we have expanded on his ideas.

We use a concept called the Pyramid of Clarity to align everyone on our high-level goals and the concrete results we expect our work to produce. The pyramid shows how our longer-term aspirations are built on top of shorter-term goals, whether we’re building our product roadmap or business plans.

But with our system, OKRs don't sit apart from our day-to-day work. Instead of locking them away in a presentation or document, the pyramid of clarity continues flowing, all the way to our projects and individual tasks. By connecting our goals to our work, our why is automatically included alongside everything we do.

OBJECTIVES:

Whatever you want to achieve.

KEY RESULTS:

How you measure your progress towards your objective.

WORK:

The individual tasks, projects, and processes that drive progress towards a key result.

This is the best way to execute OKRs. It creates clarity and meaning. And when employees have that clarity, they can unlock their best selves: engaged, creative, loyal, and productive. But that is just the tip of the iceberg. When you get OKRs right, you supercharge many different facets of your organization.

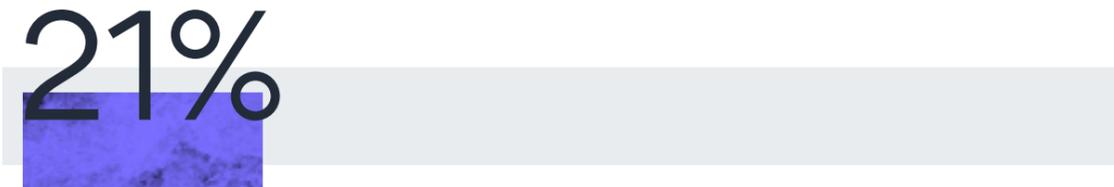
“OKRs help companies get more people involved in strategic planning on a more frequent basis. The framework also helps increase engagement and collaboration on the tracking of OKRs through structured team reviews and one-on-ones.”

— ALEX BARTHOLOMAUS, PEOPLE STRETCH SOLUTIONS

People prioritize the right work because they know what outcomes they need to drive. That maximizes impact and deepens their connection to their team and organization.

When people understand how their work contributes to top-level goals, why certain things were prioritized over others, and, ultimately, why those goals matter, they become more motivated and push themselves to achieve more.

And those benefits aren't limited only to the individual employee. Rather, they combine and ladder up to significantly improve organizational performance. According to Gallup, highly engaged business units drive 21% greater profitability than their more ambivalent counterparts.



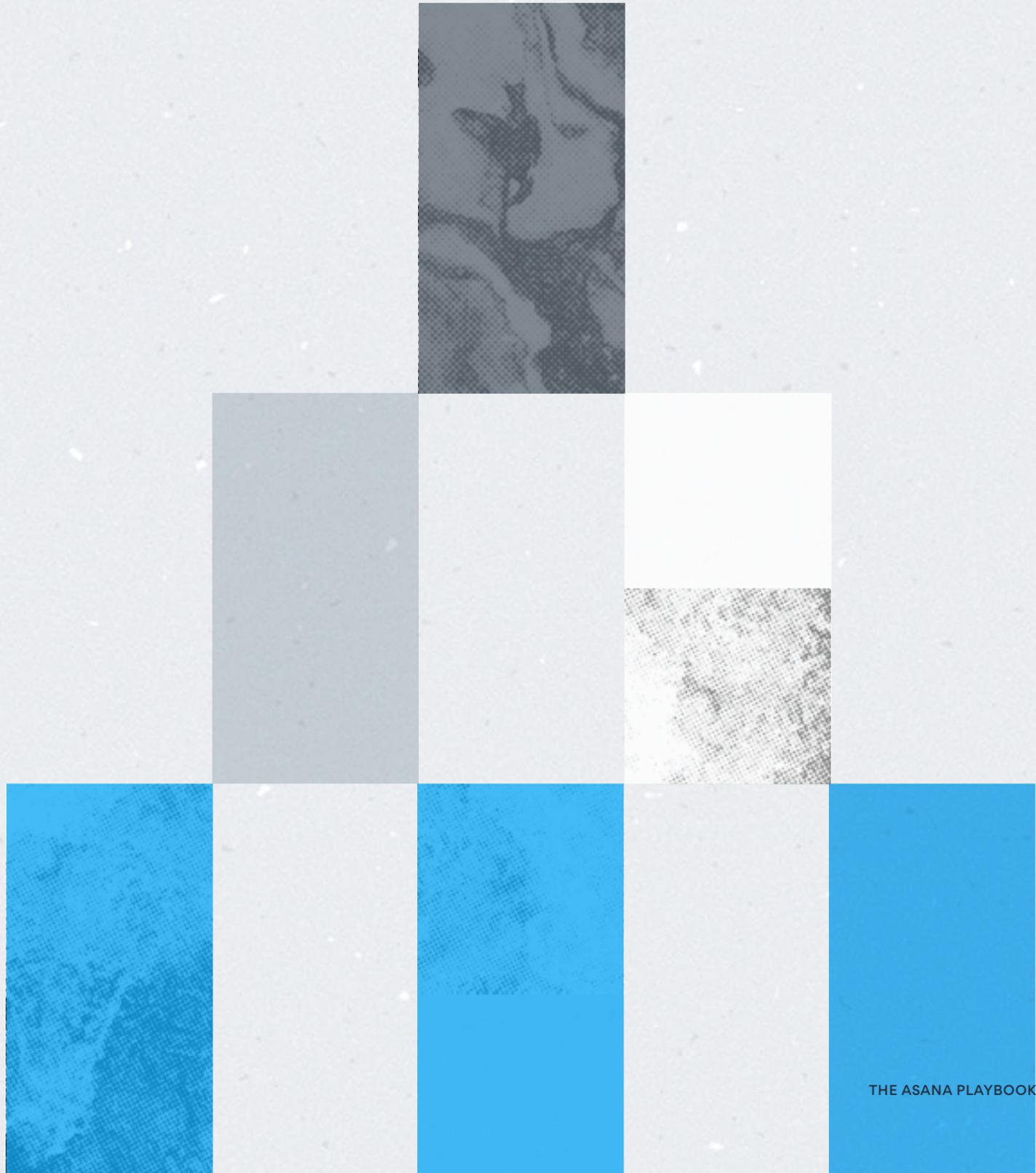
Indeed, when psychologists tested the impact of different motivational techniques on group performance, they found goal setting was one of the most effective. Just setting a handful of specific, ambitious goals boosted the participants' performance into the 80th percentile. Another set of researchers explored what happened when you gave people goals and a means of measuring their performance towards them. The result: performance jumped again—up to the 88th percentile.

OKRs don't just help those with their boots on the ground, either. Having your goals and work in a shared single source of truth grants leaders clear insights into where, when, and how they need to intervene based on progress updates.

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04

Laying the foundations for OKR success



While OKRs can help unite and coordinate unwieldy organizations, they can only do so when they are structured and deployed correctly. To give OKRs the best chance of success in your organization, you need to lay strong foundations upon which to build. Here's the prep work we recommend to set you up for success.

Secure buy-in early

All management systems rely on consistent buy-in across the organization and OKRs are no different. If you can align everyone behind a shared purpose and direct their efforts towards one objective, you can achieve great things. But if people fall out of sync or begin pursuing disorganized goals, chaos ensues.

The first step to successfully rolling out OKRs is to get people on board. They must understand not only why you are introducing OKRs but also how they can best use them.

Start with your executive leadership. To nurture approval at the top, either become or recruit an executive sponsor—someone who is willing to endorse the idea at the highest level and model the core process of OKRs. Selling the idea from within is much

more effective than having someone attempt to effect change from outside.

As you extend past your executive team, remember that for many employees, this will be the first experience they have with OKRs. And even for those with some exposure to them, the new system will feel novel and unusual. It might be useful to appoint a transformation champion to own the transition and educate the team on the background, benefits, and execution of the system. Their role is to schedule training sessions, field questions, and, ultimately, win people over.

When you're pitching OKRs, don't wrap them in unfamiliar language. People are often wary of new ideas and will throw up their defenses if they sense yet another idea being added to their laundry-list of existing processes.

To overcome their objections, couch your OKRs in the language and culture of your company. Make it feel like a natural extension of what you are already doing, rather than a new, invasive addition.

Eventually, OKRs should become a common language that is used throughout your organization, during one-on-ones, team meetings, all hands, and more. They should be ingrained in your team's day-to-day work and resonate in your company DNA.

Common pitfalls to rolling out OKRs

LACK OF COMMITMENT AND EDUCATION

OKR programs succeed when everyone in an organization fully commits to using them. This requires clear communication, buy-in, and internal education so that everyone plays their part in operationalizing OKRs and keeping them top of mind.

DISCONNECTED GOALS AND EXECUTION

When OKRs aren't clearly tied to the work itself, teams have a harder time staying connected to company objectives and sustaining alignment over time. This can also lead teams to over-engineer OKRs to reflect all their activities instead of their most important work.

INSUFFICIENT AND INEFFECTIVE TOOLS

Many organizations manage their OKRs in spreadsheets, presentations, and docs rather than a purpose-built tool. This makes the end-to-end goal management more cumbersome and means less time spent actually tracking, measuring, and reporting on progress towards goals.

NO PROCESS FOR CHECK-INS

One of the pitfalls to implementing OKRs is that organizations set and forget them, failing to put in place a regular review or check-in process. Defining clear owners, success metrics, and a process for ongoing reviews creates accountability.

Start small, then expand

When kicking off their OKR journey, many organizations choose to implement it first as a pilot program with a specific functional department, such as marketing or sales. While your goal should usually be to spread OKRs across your entire organization, starting small is a good approach.

Trialing the system within a specific team grants insights into how the methodology will work across the hierarchy of each department. In other words, how will everyone from your department head to individual contributors interact with it differently?

Another benefit of this approach is that your functional pilot group can act as a case study or example. After the group gets up to speed, you can use their improved performance to excite others.

While it's a good idea to start small, your goal should always be to scale. OKRs deliver positive results to individual teams and employees, but their greatest strength emerges when they operate consistently across an entire organization.

One of the biggest challenges facing C-suite executives, for example, is that their functional departments use different processes to set, measure, and track goals. By centralizing those functions in one goal-setting system, leaders can see how an entire organization is performing with a quick look at a single platform or tool.

05

How to run a smooth OKR process



It's easy to look at successful businesses and assume it was their core idea that got them where they are. Intel invented the microchip, Netflix pioneered on-demand media streaming, and Google built the modern search engine. But an idea will only get you so far.

What brought those companies to the forefront of their fields was not their core idea, but its execution.

Netflix, for example, is the name in media streaming, not because Reed Hastings had a great idea, but because he—and his team—executed it with exceptional focus and clarity. It's the same for all great companies powered by OKRs: they delivered great ideas by faultless execution.

Often, leaders will read about OKRs and implement them half-heartedly. When OKRs aren't used with intent—meaning, they're used incorrectly and not connected to your day-to-day work—employees lose interest and the OKR system will disappear.

Execution can be challenging, but it doesn't have to be complicated. All you need is consistency, dedication, and planning. Here's how you turn OKRs from a nice idea into a sustainable, long-term management practice.



Step 01



Step 02



Step 03



Step 04



Step 05



Step 06

Set the basic rules for your OKR Program

The OKR formula is designed to be flexible enough to fit your particular purpose. Yet many organizations treat it as a rigid framework and refuse to deviate from a prescriptive methodology. This is a recipe for disaster.

Before you implement OKRs, we recommend you set the basic rules for your program. These rules define how OKRs work in your teams and your organization. Specifically, there are three elements to consider: cadence, check-in process, and OKR creation.

Your cadence is perhaps the simplest rule. It's how often you set your OKRs. In our experience, setting objectives annually delivers the best reward as they become the pillars of your strategy. However, if your organization moves rapidly, you have the option to set OKRs more frequently — half-yearly, quarterly, or even monthly.



The second element is your check-in process, which is essentially the schedule you set to update and review your progress. Again, your optimal schedule is unique to your organization. If your goals are grand and slow-moving, a bi-weekly or monthly check-in may suffice. However, if your goals are smaller and progress rapidly, you ought to check-in more regularly.

Regardless of what cadence you choose for your check-in progress, you must stick to it. One of the pitfalls to implementing OKRs is that organizations set and forget them, missing out the regular check-in events.

Finally, you must decide on how you will set your OKRs, for which there are three basic models: top-down, bottom-up, and hybrid.

- In a top-down model, the person or people at the top of a team or an organization set the objectives and key results. The objectives and key results then flow down to subteams and individual contributors.
- In a bottom-up model, teams set their own OKRs based on what they think their organization should do. In order for this model to work, teams require a clearly defined vision and mission.
- The third model is a hybrid model, borrowing elements from top-down and bottom-up. We use this model at Asana. In the hybrid model, senior leaders set objectives but it's the individual teams and employees who create the key results..

The majority of organizations choose to adopt the hybrid-model because it creates balance, and empowers teams to suggest the outcomes that will drive progress towards their objectives.

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Co-create company-wide objectives

Now that you've set the basic rules of your OKR program, you're ready to start rolling out the structure across your organization.

Start off by co-creating top-level objectives for your organization. These are the pillars of your strategy for the next year. They're the important and substantial activities that lead to the success of your mission. They provide teams clarity on your bigger picture and set out what you want to achieve over a long-term timeframe.

Some examples of great company-wide objectives are:

- Create the lowest carbon footprint in your specific industry
- Reach meaningful scale by achieving a certain number of software subscriptions/month
- Refine your product experience as measured by user sentiment



As often as possible, design your objectives to be falsifiable and clearly measurable. At the end of your OKR cycle, you should be able to conclusively say whether or not you met each objective.

A great objective will also walk the line between feasibility and aspiration. You should be confident that you can achieve each goal in the time allotted—but you should also need to work hard to get there.

When setting company-wide objectives, be careful your output does not grow out of control. As more people with different perspectives join the conversation, the number of objectives can quickly balloon. It's generally better to have your teams focus on doing their best work to accomplish a few objectives, rather than spreading themselves thin and missing many.

Combine crowdsourced objective creation with in-depth analysis from your top brass. Host an executive brainstorming session and challenge your leaders to reflect their past year to extract meaningful objectives for the next. Encourage leaders to articulate what these objectives are, but rein them in if their discussion snowballs into how to actually achieve them.

This step should be an iterative process. Once you've drafted your company-wide objectives, share them with stakeholders for review and adjust them based on feedback.

After confirming your company-wide objectives, know that your work still isn't finished. These are the overarching goals for your entire organization and they need to become the north stars on which your teams and employees are always focused—not yet another forgotten management fad. For this, communication is key.

Design a comprehensive communication plan to educate your employees on their new objectives. Spend time explaining why you've introduced OKRs and how you landed on your final company-wide objectives.

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Set KRs for company-wide key results

Your company-wide objectives provide shared goals for your teams. Once you've decided on them, you need to work out how you'll track your progress towards them. In other words, it's time for key results.

When people are starting out with OKRs, selecting effective key results is one of the trickiest tasks. At Asana, we suggest people use the CRIB test to hone their key results to perfection. Here's how it works.

CLARITY:

Will you clearly know whether or not you hit your key result? Ideally, your key results should be metric-oriented so progress can be easily tracked. When metrics aren't possible, we sometimes use "wisdom of the crowd" phrases, such as "three-quarters of team members believe we have achieved our goal."

RESULTS-ORIENTED:

Is your key result focused on outcomes, rather than the work required to achieve it? For example, compare "50% of beta testers are using our calendar feature by end of quarter" to "Launch calendar beta."

IMPORTANT:

Do you care about the result? Would you be disappointed if you failed? Whether or not your key results are directly linked to your objectives is a good indicator of its importance.

BIG:

Are your key results large enough to effectively measure progress towards your objective? Avoid using a KR to represent a specific piece of work that simply needs to be completed.

Each key result should have an owner, someone to track its progress and post regular updates. Before confirming key results, they should go back to the objective owner for review.

Your key results should be challenging. If you're certain you're going to nail them, you're not pushing hard enough. Like other companies who use OKRs, we follow John Doerr's advice and aim to hit 70% of our key results in each period. If we achieve more than that, we know we weren't ambitious enough in our planning.

After your key results are approved, assign each one an owner to report on its status and progress. This is important since assigning responsibilities stops key results from floating off into the digital ether to be forgotten



Like other companies who use OKRs, we follow John Doerr's advice and aim to hit 70% of our key results in each period. If we achieve more than that, we know we weren't ambitious enough in our planning.

Although the execution and evaluation of your work come later, we recommend you set your grading template early. Here are some key criteria to consider:

- The meaning of Achieved, Partial, Missed, and Dropped at the key result level
- The overall grading rubric that combines all underlying key results
- Cadence to review progress

Here's how we grade key results at Asana:

ACHIEVED:

Your team hit the criteria of the key result as defined.

PARTIAL:

Your team made significant progress towards their original goal or completed several parts of a multi-part goal. However, the success criteria were not fully attained.

MISSED:

You didn't do enough to achieve the partial grading.

DROPPED:

Your goal was eliminated or postponed in light of shifting priorities.

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Develop team and individual OKRs

To get the most from OKRs, they must flow down through your organization, guiding the work of smaller teams and individuals.

When developing team-level OKRs, we recommend you take a bottom-up approach and grant your teams a high degree of autonomy. After all, they're the ones doing the day-to-day work, so they will have a much deeper understanding of where to invest their resources and efforts to generate the best results.

Have your teams work out how they will best contribute to company-wide OKRs and develop their own objectives and key results. As with your company-wide OKRs, communication is key. Share and socialize your team-level OKRs and encourage buy-in and approval.

Finally, after you've finalized your team-level OKRs, you step down to the individual-level. These follow the same process of setting OKRs at the team level.

As a rule of thumb, each team or individual should have no more than three OKRs—enough to keep them challenged but not so much to spread their focus.

Team OKR Examples

MARKETING

Objective: Increase brand awareness

- **Key Result:** Drive 1M web visitors
- **Key Result:** Increase social media following by 10x
- **Key Result:** Recruit and onboard 1,000 community members

PRODUCT

Objective: Launch major product initiative by end of quarter

- **Key Result:** Recommendation score of 8 or above
- **Key Result:** 40% of MAU use new feature
- **Key Result:** Increase sign-up-to- conversion rate from 15% to 25%

SALES

Objective: Increase recurring revenue

- **Key Result:** Reach \$2M in MRR
- **Key Result:** Increase annual renewals by 25%
- **Key Result:** Reduce churn by 10%

HUMAN RESOURCES

Objective: Drive employee impact and engagement

- **Key Result:** Increase employee satisfaction by 20%
- **Key Result:** Achieve 90% employee participation in engagement survey
- **Key Result:** Double positive manager feedback

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Execute, track, and refine.

One of the benefits of OKRs is that they help scale prioritization across your organization. When they're done right, every individual has the context they need to prioritize their workload and focus on their most important tasks.

Once you have defined your organization's objectives and key results, it's time to identify the programs and projects you and your team will work on to achieve your goals.

By connecting your goals to the work being done to achieve them, you make it easier to report on your progress towards goals, and address any problems that might stop you from completing a goal.

Connecting your organizational goals to work also keeps your employees engaged in their work. People want to know that what they do matters, and the best way to show them is to connect their work to high-level goals. So when they understand how their day-to-day work fits into the bigger picture, they feel empowered to do their best work.

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Grade and reflect on OKRs

Once your planning cycle is completed, your work still isn't finished. Instead of immediately moving on to the next cycle, ask your team to pause and grade their OKRs. Individuals should be accountable for grading the key results they have ownership of and for writing a short write-up explaining the grading.

After people grade their key results, managers should collect the results and roll them up into their objectives. One of the many benefits of OKRs is transparency, so we suggest managers grade their objectives and share the overall results throughout your organization.

With your grading complete, dig into what didn't work during the cycle and make a note of what worked well. For future cycles, you will be able to double down on your strengths and support your weaknesses. If you've missed either objectives or key results, host working sessions with your teams to reflect and learn.

06

Achieving so much



Andy Grove once lamented: “There are so many people working so hard and achieving so little.” And he’s right. In businesses all around the world, people are working long hours with great dedication and effort—but they’re achieving very little.

It’s because hard work doesn’t always result in success.

As Grove showed with his OKR methodology, where we focus our attention and efforts is perhaps the most important part of our working lives. If you leave your employees to find their own way, their disorganized efforts likely won’t achieve much.

But if you unite people behind a shared mission and harness their work to pull towards shared objectives, you can create inspiring companies and achieve so much.



Set and achieve your
company goals

[Learn more](#)