

# The word that changed my view of everything.

by Anthony Paustian, Ph.D.



For over 25 years, I had the opportunity to teach a large number of university students in a variety of business-related topics. Like any decent business professor, I taught the concepts related to effective planning, including the concept of SMART goals. SMART was an acronym meaning that a “good” goal twice Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-based.

I never questioned the textbooks, and since the concept seemed to make perfect sense at least on its surface—I kept teaching it year after year .until “it” happened.

For whatever reason, I was listening to the speech John F. Kennedy delivered to a large crowd at the stadium of Rice University on September 12, 1962. I’ve heard this speech a number of times because, as a big fan of the Apollo Program, I was always inspired by its over-reaching passion. But on this day, a single word from the middle of the speech resonated with me—a word that has forever changed my view of SMART.

*We choose to go to the moon! We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are HARD; because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one we intend to win, and the others, too.*

When I heard this particular passage, I suddenly realized I had been lying to my students for years. The Apollo Program or any other story of extraordinary achievement never could have occurred if the visionaries behind them had thought in terms of SMART. Anything awesome, I mean game-changing awesome, seldom happens because of SMART thinking, and it’s because of the words achievable and realistic.

When President Kennedy made the decision to go to the Moon in 1961, it was right after Alan Shepard’s 15-minute pop shot to space—straight up, straight down—which was the sum total of America’s success with manned space flight. It was a bold vision to say the least, especially in light of the fact that we didn’t have the technology and still had to invent about 80% of it, and we didn’t have the necessary resources budgeted for it (which would ultimately require about 5% of the federal budget). What’s more, not only did Gallup and other research groups show that well over half of the U.S. population didn’t want the program, Kennedy’s own advisors were opposed to it.

But this was going to be extraordinary, and the quarter-million mile trek to the moon wasn’t going to happen with words like achievable and realistic. It required a completely different goal paradigm, one that allows people to reimagine something completely different. It required HARD thinking. HARD goals are:

**Honest:** Absolute honesty is the beginning of any real goal. If the goal isn't at your core—something that you truly wish to accomplish—it will never be achieved. It's the difference between "wanting" and "doing" and the resulting behavioral shift necessary to see a goal to completion. And honest goals will have a positive influence and effect on others. No one was more committed to going to the moon than Kennedy, and his passion and internal drive to see a successful outcome despite the odds was contagious and helped get everyone else on board. Having had the honor and privilege to speak at length with many of the Apollo astronauts and members of mission control, I could easily see a common thread of incredible work ethic that was inspired by Kennedy's commitment and leadership—the desire to succeed was at their core, too.

**Actionable:** Despite perceived challenges and difficulty, you have to be willing to start right away. You can't hold off until the time becomes right. When Kennedy decided that we, as a country, would put a man on the moon by the end of the decade, it began immediately. They set down an aggressive plan to be on the moon within eight and a half years. They didn't wait on the technology to catch up, the resources to become available, or public sentiment to change. They simply jumped in with both feet.

**Radical:** This is basically the "Go Big or Go Home" aspect of HARD thinking. To truly do anything that's extraordinary or game-changing, it will require radical behavior that doesn't fit within the achievable or realistic aspects of SMART thinking. The Apollo Program was massive. Over 400,000 people and 20,000 organizations were involved. Based on the 1969 census information from the Department of Labor, if you were to remove the teenagers from the workforce numbers, one in a hundred and fifty people in the U.S. were in some way involved in the Apollo Program. They had to "imagineer" everything since most of the technology, procedures, and aspects related to space travel were unknown. The result would be the creation and development of thousands of products and companies that many of us take for granted everyday. In fact, the outcomes were so incredible that many economists value the Apollo Program's societal return on investment from \$7 to a high of \$14 for every dollar spent on it.

Radical means doing that which most people are not willing to do.

**Detailed:** This is where the specific, measurable, and time-based aspects of SMART thinking come into play. All planning must still incorporate these elements to some extent to help guarantee success. All of the Apollo planning, procedures, and processes had to be extremely specific and measurable since human life was at stake. Even simple minor details could result in catastrophic outcomes as evidenced by the Apollo 1 fire. Kennedy had set a time-based goal before Congress of "before this decade is out" for the accomplishment of the ultimate goal of "landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to Earth." However, consider this. If the time-based aspect of this goal wasn't eight and a half years and was instead an "easier" 38 and a half years (before the end of the century), I doubt we would have achieved the desired outcome considering changing politics, public sentiment, and demands on resources.

It's difficult to find modern examples of the degree of HARD thinking used for the Apollo Program, although Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos are both making cases for it. Based on media reports, blog posts, and conversations with people within NASA, few thought it was a good idea in 2010 to transition to the private sector for a large portion of our nation's space program. And while it has taken years longer than anticipated, it's difficult to dispute the successes that SpaceX and Blue Origin have achieved today, especially in light of this being accomplished with considerably fewer resources and a fraction of the people involved in Apollo.

HARD thinking also applies to leading yourself as much as it does creating extraordinary change within organizations. Ask yourself when was the last time something great or game-changing occurred in your life when you played it safe or truly used SMART thinking? Our greatest accomplishments in life aren't easy, and at some point there's a recognition that the necessary effort will be difficult and realized only through intense focus, effort, and tenacity. Any goal that requires that type of transformational thinking—thinking required to change deeply entrenched behaviors, habits, and modes of thought—isn't SMART. It's HARD.

