The Determinants of Goal Commitment

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The concept and measurement of commitment to goals, a key aspect of goal-setting theory, are discussed. The strength of the relationship between commitment and performance is asserted to depend on the amount of variance in commitment. Three major categories of determinants of commitment are discussed: external factors (authority, peer influence, external rewards), interactive factors (participation and competition), and internal factors (expectancy, internal rewards). Applications of these ideas are made and new research directions are suggested.

Reviews of the literature have shown that goal-setting theory is among the most scientifically valid and useful theories in organizational science (Mento, Steel, & Karren, 1987; Miner, 1980; Pinder, 1984; Tubbs, 1986). The effectiveness of goal setting, however, presupposes the existence of goal commitment (Erez & Kanfer, 1983; Latham & Yukl, 1975a; Locke, 1968; Locke & Latham, 1984); it is virtually axiomatic that if there is no commitment to goals, then goal setting does not work. Naylor, Pritchard, and Ilgen (1980) have made goal commitment a key element in their general motivation theory.

A practical demonstration of the importance of goal commitment was given by Erez and Zidon (1984) in a laboratory study. They found a significant dropoff in performance as goal commitment declined in response to increasingly difficult goals. In field settings, noncommitment to organizational goals can result in restriction of output or "soldiering" (Mathewson, 1931; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939/1956; Taylor, 1911/1967). For example, in the famous bank-wiring observation room study at Hawthorne, the workers' personal goals (despite some inconsistencies in their reports) clearly were lower than the officially assigned goals or boggles (pp. 412-413) indicating less than full acceptance of management's goals.

Coch and French's (1948) classic study of participation was designed specifically to compare procedures for overcoming resistance by factory workers to changes in work standards or goals accompanying product changes (see also Cadwell, 1970; Goodman, 1979; Perkins, Niven, & Lawler, 1983; Tushman, 1974). Organizational change, driven by rapid changes in technology and the world economy, is even more a fact of life today than in the past. Thus, understanding the factors that both inhibit and promote goal commitment is of great practical as well as theoretical importance.

Some confusion exists in the use of the terms goal acceptance and goal commitment. In 1968, Locke implied that goal acceptance referred to initial agreement with a goal, whereas commitment referred to resistance to changing the goal.
later. The terms are used differently now, however. Commitment is the more inclusive concept because it refers to one’s attachment to or determination to reach a goal, regardless of the goal’s origin. Thus it can apply to any goal, whether self-set, participatively set, or assigned. Acceptance is one type of commitment; it refers specifically to commitment to a goal which is assigned (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981).

It is possible that subsequent research will demonstrate the utility of a more marked separation of the concepts of acceptance and commitment, but thus far, such a distinction has not been shown to be useful. For example, Earley and Kanfer (1985, p. 382) in their study found that commitment and acceptance measures formed one, highly homogeneous index (alpha = .95). Leifer and McGannon (1986) found that a variety of alleged commitment and acceptance measures formed four separate factors; however, only one factor, that related to commitment, was associated with performance. Thus, the generic term commitment is used throughout this paper. The purpose of this review is to summarize and integrate research findings on the determinants of goal commitment.

Measurement of Commitment

A precondition for discovering the factors that affect goal commitment is the ability to measure it, or more specifically, to measure it in a way that will show systematic relationships between it and (a) prior causal factors, and (b) subsequent action (performance).

Commitment has been measured directly, indirectly, and by inference. Examples of direct questions are: "How committed are you to attaining the goal set?" and "To what degree do you accept the goal set?" (Earley, 1985b; Earley & Kanfer, 1985; Latham & Steele, 1983). The use of direct questions assumes that subjects can introspect well enough to detect varying degrees of commitment, and that the scales used allow people to indicate those degrees.

Leifer and McGannon (1986) used a direct approach in the study noted earlier. They found that the commitment factor that was related to performance included items which asked subjects how enthusiastic they were about trying for their goal. This emotion-focused factor not only was a more valid predictor of performance but showed higher variance than the more cognitively focused factor containing items which simply asked subjects if they were committed (personal communication, 1987).

An indirect measure of commitment is the discrepancy between an assigned goal level and the personal goal the subject claims actually to be trying to attain (Hannan, 1975). Earley (1985a, 1985b) found that the direct and indirect types of measures were highly correlated (.76 and .90, in two studies). The indirect method, of course, can be used only to measure commitment to assigned or participatively set goals. Asking subjects to set their own goals and then to indicate their personal goals makes no sense.

A third way to measure commitment is by inference from performance. While performance cannot be a catch-all measure of commitment, since performance can be caused by other factors such as ability, the use of inference from performance seems both theoretically and empirically justified. Theoretically, Salancik (1977) argued that behavior or action is the ultimate proof of commitment and thus, by implication, the most accurate measure of it. Commitment, he argued, quoting from others, is "the binding of the individual to behavioral acts." He claimed that "action is a necessary ingredient of commitment" (p. 4). Thus, "a person who is committed to a goal will try harder to achieve it than if he is not" (p. 27). Empirically, commitment inferences from performance levels can be justified if performance goal level, ability, and so forth, were or can be assumed to have been controlled or randomized. Further, commitment could be inferable from goal choice, whereas lack of commitment could be inferable from goal rejection; that is, at the time of choice it seems virtually axiomatic that people will choose the goal to which they are most committed (all forces and influences considered). Similarly, individuals who resist change, that is, resist changing

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from a current to a new goal, logically would seem to be uncommitted or less committed to the new goal. (The causes of such commitment or lack thereof, of course, still need to be explained.) It should also be noted that inference is not confined to the use of behavioral measures. Inference is also involved when direct, self-report measures of commitment are made. One is inferring that the verbal report corresponds to an actual psychological state. The inference in the case of behavior is simply more risky due to possible confounding variables.

A problem in the measurement of commitment exists if commitment affects performance, but the person is unable to report it accurately. This could result from poor introspection (see Schweiger, Anderson, & Locke, 1985, for a discussion of the validity of introspection). Latham, Mitchell, and Dossett (1978) reported the results of a study in which actual commitment differences may have existed but could not be reported accurately by the subjects. They found that offering a monetary incentive affected the performance of engineers and scientists, even though this difference was not mediated by differences in reported goal commitment or goal difficulty.

It may be possible to solve the introspection problem by using within-subject designs (e.g., Erez & Zidon, 1984). These should be more sensitive to different degrees of commitment than between-subject designs because scale interpretations should be uniform across conditions.

Goal commitment researchers also must decide whether to administer commitment questions to subjects, before, during, or after performance. Measuring before prevents post hoc rationalization; measuring after reveals if subjects changed their goals during performance. However, the results of research on the effects of both goal content and "learning without awareness" suggest that it does not matter when such variables are measured; the same results are obtained in both cases (Locke & Bryan, 1968; Spielberger, 1965). Similarly, Earley and Kanfer (1985) found no difference in results when goal commitment was measured both before and after performance.

**Commitment-Performance Relationship**

Researchers have had difficulty demonstrating the effect of goal commitment on performance because, in the majority of studies, goal commitment has been easily achieved (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). Often, the small amount of variability that has been found was unrelated to performance (e.g., Dumont & Grimes, 1982; Frost & Mahoney, 1976; Huber & Neale, 1986; Ivancevich & McMahon, 1977b, 1977c, 1982; Locke, 1982; Locke, Frederick, Lee, & Bobko, 1984; London & Oldham, 1976; Mento, Carlgren, & Locke, 1980; Oldham, 1975; Pritchard & Curtis, 1973; Yukl & Latham, 1978). However, when steps are taken to deliberately increase variability, the importance of goal commitment can be demonstrated. For example, Erez and Zidon's (1984) phase 2 results (shown in Figure 1) indicate that when commitment dropped markedly in response to increasingly difficult goals, performance dropped accordingly.

Several other studies also have generated sufficient variability in goal commitment to yield significant relationships between commitment and performance (Earley, 1985a, 1985b, 1986; Earley & Kanfer, 1985; Erez, 1986; Erez & Arad, 1986; Erez, Earley, & Hulin, 1985; Hannan, 1975; Kolb, Winter, & Berlew, 1968; Locke & Shaw, 1984; Locke, Frederick, Buckner, & Bobko, 1984.) Ivancevich and McMahon (1977a) and Organ (1977) obtained mixed results.

The level at which the data are analyzed also can affect the commitment-performance relationship. Earley (1985b) reported that goal commitment was related to performance within each of a number of goal difficulty levels. When he combined subjects across goal levels, however, goal commitment was no longer significant as either a main or an interaction effect. In contrast, the goal difficulty effect was highly significant.

It is important to observe that the overall correlation of commitment and performance
Figure 1. Mean performance and goal acceptance scores for different levels of objective goal difficulty in phase 2. (Adapted from Erez & Zidon, 1984.)
across goal levels can be negative (Locke, Frederick, Buckner, & Bobko, 1984) because very hard goals, which lead to high performance, generally are accepted to a lesser degree than easy goals which lead to low performance.

It should be noted that even easy goals are not always fully accepted. However, goal rejection by subjects in an easy goal condition may not mean the same thing as goal rejection by subjects in a hard goal condition. Rejection in the former case may entail setting a harder personal goal (Locke, Mento, & Katcher, 1978), whereas rejection in the latter case may entail setting an easier personal goal.

In summary, theory as well as empirical research suggest that there is indeed a relationship between goal commitment and performance. Thus, there is a need to understand the factors that affect goal commitment. The remainder of this paper analyzes the literature dealing with the determinants of goal commitment.

Figure 2 shows an inductive model of commitment. Determinants of commitment are put into three categories: external influences (authority, peer influence, and external rewards); interactive influences (participation and competition); and internal factors (expectancy and internal rewards). It is assumed that the external and interactive factors undergo cognitive processing but this has not been addressed in the research to date; thus, it is not discussed here. Campbell (1982) discussed some of these factors in his review of the goal choice literature, but there is only a small degree of overlap between the literature covered in his review and the one presented here.

Determinants of Commitment

External Influences

Legitimate Authority. Most goal-setting studies have focused on the effects of assigned goals. The subjects or employees were asked to try for a specific level of performance on a task. Overwhelmingly, people tried to do what was asked of them (Latham & Lee, 1986). Studies that measured personal goals after the goals were assigned show that the two are highly correlated (Garland, 1983). This is not to say that instructions from an authority figure will always be obeyed; they will not (Bandura, 1966; Locke, Bryan, & Kendall, 1968). However, people usually choose to obey an authority figure because they judge the requests/assignments to be legitimate.

When an experimenter instructs a subject to try for a certain goal, he or she also affects the goals the subjects subsequently choose for themselves. For example, when subjects are asked on one or more trials to try for an assigned goal and subsequently are allowed to set their own goals on another trial, the self-set goal is similar in difficulty to the previously assigned goal (Locke, Frederick, Buckner, & Bobko, 1984; Locke, Frederick, Lee, & Bobko, 1984; Huber & Neale, 1986). This occurs despite the fact that people report that they are free to set any goal they want (Locke, Frederick, Buckner, & Bobko, 1984). Thus, commitment to an assigned goal may endure beyond the period of the actual assignment.

It appears that goal commitment reflects compliance with legitimate authority or power (French & Raven, 1959). This type of authority certainly exists in both laboratory and field settings. It may account for the high degree of similarity of results found in the two settings (Latham & Lee, 1986). In the laboratory, the experimenter is an authority figure. An experiment, by its nature, is a "demand situation" (Orne, 1962). Similarly, in industry, most employees consider it the supervisor's or manager's right to tell them what to do, because doing what one is told is inherent in the employment contract. Oldham (1975) found supervisory legitimacy to be significantly related to the intent to work hard to attain an assigned goal.

Salancik (1977) argued that assigned goals lead to commitment because (a) assigning the goal implies that the recipient is capable of reaching the goal, and (b) listening to the assignment without objection is itself a form of consent. These may, in fact, be two of the mechanisms by which
legitimate authority affects a subordinate’s behavior.

A number of studies suggest specific aspects of authority figures that may enhance their effectiveness. Although not all of these studies directly measured goal commitment, the results indicate that further exploration of these factors is worthwhile. For example, Ronan, Latham, and Kinne (1973) found that supervisors of logging crews who stayed on the job after assigning goals obtained higher productivity from their crews than those who assigned goals to their crews but did not remain on the job with them. One explanation for this finding is that the supervisor’s physical presence enhanced goal commitment, although other explanations cannot be ruled out. Latham and Saari (1979b) and Dossett, Cella, Greenberg, and Adrian (1983) explored the ef-
fects of supervisory supportiveness (Likert, 1961) on goal commitment and performance. Generally, correlations between supportiveness and commitment have not been significant because commitment has been uniformly high. But supportiveness has led to higher goals being set and/or higher performance (e.g., Likert, 1967, p. 53ff). Latham and Yukl (1975b) found that goal setting had no effect if management was perceived as indifferent to the goals that were set either by or for logging crews. Based on these findings, additional studies of supportiveness seem warranted.

Trust in authority is another dimension that has long been stressed as important to employee motivation by organizational development practitioners. Existing research provides supportive evidence for the effects of trust. In a study by Earley (1986) tire tread layers in England and in the United States were assigned goals by either union stewards or supervisors. In the U.S. sample, these two sources had no differential effect on goal commitment, but in the English sample, there was more commitment when the rationale for the goals was explained by the union steward than when it was explained by the supervisors. Earley argued that in England, workers trust their union stewards more than they do their supervisors. These results support those of Oldham (1975) who found perceptions of trust to be significantly related to the intent to work hard for an assigned goal.

The exertion of pressure on subordinates by those in authority may also affect goal commitment. Both Andrews and Farris (1972) and Hall and Lawler (1971) found that pressure from superiors (and others) was related positively to performance of scientists and engineers. Excessive pressure was found to be dysfunctional (Andrews & Farris, 1972; Forward & Zander, 1971; Likert, 1967). Goal commitment, however, was not actually measured in these studies.

Peer (Group) Influence. As noted earlier, the effect of peer pressure on performance is a well-known phenomenon in industry. Historically the focus has been on documenting how peer pressure combines with past instances of rate-cutting to enhance commitment to worker-originated group goals that are lower than management’s assigned or preferred goals. As noted earlier, Taylor (1911/1967) called this phenomenon “systematic soldiering.” Later it became known as “restriction of output” and was documented in the now classic studies of Mathewson (1931) and Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939). Commitment to uniform production standards is determined to a great extent by the level of group cohesion. Seashore (1954) found that high cohesion led to more uniform productivity within groups than did low cohesion, clearly implying an effect of commitment. Group commitment to high performance is facilitated by management support (Seashore, 1954), by the congruence between standards urged on the group by others and the members’ own desires (Zander & Ulberg, 1971), and by the attachment of high importance to group goals and group success (Forward & Zander, 1971; Schacter, Ellertson, McBride, & Gregory, 1951; Zander & Ulberg, 1971).

Matsui, Kakuyama, and Onglatco (1986) found that in two-person groups, commitment was higher for subjects who were assigned both group and individual goals than it was for subjects who were assigned only individual goals for their segment of the group task. Commitments that carry responsibility to others can generate social pressures to follow through (Bandura, 1986).

Peers (and others) also may affect performance by acting as role models (Bandura, 1986). Rakestraw and Weiss (1981) found that modeling affected goal level. A specific, positive effect of peer modeling on goal commitment was found by Earley and Kanfer (1985).

Values, Incentives, and Rewards. Expectancy, operant, and social learning theorists would all agree, at least by implication, that commitment to actions is affected by incentives and rewards. For example, expectancy theorists predict that the value (valence) of the perceived outcomes and the estimated probability that effort and performance would lead to such outcomes would
affect commitment/choice and, thereby, performance. The evidence seems consistent with this belief.

1) General Valence and Instrumentality. Yukl and Latham (1978) found an overall measure of goal instrumentality to be significantly related to goal commitment for female typists. Mentz, et al. (1980) found significant relationships between general valence ratings and goal acceptance in two laboratory studies involving a perceptual speed task. Using the same task, Locke and Shaw (1984) found a significant relationship between the overall valence of winning and commitment to winning a moniesary prize in a competitive setting. These findings show that monetary rewards can increase the level of goal commitment and, presumably, performance for some individuals.

In a study using within-subject design and a number comparison task, Matsui, Okada, and Mizuguchi (1981) found that the overall instrumentality of attaining hard goals was higher than that of attaining easy goals. Goal commitment was not measured, but performance change across goal conditions was highly correlated with the difference in valence ratings across goal conditions. This suggests more commitment to high performance in the high goal (and thus, high instrumentality) condition than in the low goal condition.

Dachler and Mobley (1973) found complex measures of general expected utility (based on combined expectancy, valence, and instrumentality ratings) to be significantly related to both current and future production goals of blue-collar employees in two plants. These self-chosen goals can be inferred as the ones to which the employees were most committed.

2) Monetary Incentives. Locke et al. (1968) hypothesized that monetary incentives affect performance by affecting goal level or goal commitment. Although several studies show that these incentives can affect performance independently of goal level (Campbell, 1984; Huber, 1985a; London & Oldham, 1976; Pritchard & Curtis, 1973; Terborg, 1976; Terborg & Miller, 1978), only one of these studies (Pritchard & Curtis, 1973) actually measured goal commitment. They found no effect of incentives on reported commitment. The performance results suggest, however, that commitment could have played a role in some of these studies since other factors (goal level, etc.) were controlled. Oldham (1975) found that a pay-focused instrumentality rating was significantly related to the intention to attain an assigned goal.

Mowen, Middlemist, and Luther (1981) reported the existence of an interesting interaction effect between money and goals. Under a piece-rate system, high goals resulted in higher performance than medium or easy goals. But, when subjects were paid a bonus only if they attained their goal, performance was lower when the goal was hard than when it was moderately difficult or easy. It may be that under the hard goal and task-and-bonus system, subjects were not committed to their goals because they believed there was no chance of earning the bonus. Under a task-and-bonus system, partial success, in the sense of coming close to the goal, is not rewarded. In contrast, the piece-rate payment system rewards partial success, because payment is based on performance, not goal attainment. When hard goals are assigned without tangible rewards, people can feel some accomplishment even if they do not fully attain the goals. Under such conditions one would expect commitment to hard goals to be higher than under a task-and-bonus system.

3) Punishment. Latham and Saari (1982) found that unionized truck drivers committed themselves to a goal-setting program under four conditions: (a) that it would not lead to layoffs, (b) that monetary incentives (viewed as potentially punitive) would not be used, (c) that the goals would be voluntary, and (d) that supervisors would be supportive of attempts to reach the goals, and the truckers would not be punished for failure. The program was successful as long as the employees believed that these terms were being met. When the employees concluded that these conditions were not being met, they interpreted the program as punitive, and rejected
it by using an extreme form of goal rejection, a wildcat strike.

Interactive Factors

Participation. Findings about the effect participation has on goal commitment are contradictory. The first series of studies questioning the importance of participation were conducted at General Electric by Meyer and his associates (French, Kay, & Meyer, 1966; Meyer, Kay, & French, 1965). Their widely disseminated conclusion was that it is not so important how a goal is set as it is that a goal, in fact, be set.

Latham and Yukl (1975b) found that participatively set goals led to higher performance than assigned goals only among uneducated woods workers. This difference may have been due to the higher goals that were set in the participative condition; goal commitment was not measured. Subsequently, a series of nine (five field and four laboratory) experiments comparing participative and assigned goal setting was conducted by Latham and his colleagues. Eight of the studies found no differences in goal commitment regardless of whether the goal was assigned or set participatively, when goal difficulty was held constant (Dossett, Latham, & Mitchell, 1979; 2 studies); Latham & Marshall, 1982; Latham & Saari, 1979a; Latham & Steele, 1983; Latham et al., 1978; Latham, Steele, & Saari, 1982; Latham & Yukl, 1976). The exception was Latham and Saari’s study (1979b), in which the participation effect probably was cognitive not motivational, because the participative subjects asked more questions regarding task requirements than the assigned goal subjects.

Ivanovcevich (1976, 1977) also failed to find consistent differences in the effects of participative and assigned goals on various performance measures in two field studies. Dossett et al. (1983) found no effect on commitment or performance attributable to participation in a field study.

These null findings are consistent with conclusions drawn from reviews of the participation literature in general (Locke & Schweiger, 1979; Locke, Feren, McCaleb, Shaw, & Denny, 1980) and with those drawn from reviews of the participation in goal-setting literature in particular (Schweiger & Leana, 1986; Latham & Lee, 1986; Latham & Yukl, 1975a). A meta-analysis of the goal-setting literature by Mento et al. (1987) which focused on effect size rather than direction as in the case of the other reviews, found only a borderline effect (approximately 4 percent) in favor of participation. Such a finding is considered trivial (Fowler, 1985). Citing Lykken (1968), Fowler argued that molar psychological variables share on the average about 4 to 5 percent common variance. Tubbs (1986) also found that participation had a negligible effect in another meta-analysis of goal-setting studies even when goal difficulty was not held constant.

However, a series of experiments conducted by Erez and her colleagues has found results consistently favoring participative over assigned goal setting (Earley, 1985b; Earley & Kanfer, 1985; Erez, 1986; Erez, Earley, & Hulin, 1985; Erez & Arad, 1986). In addition, these studies found significant relationships between goal commitment and performance. A key reason for the latter finding is that Erez’s procedures, as a package, produced a much wider range of goal commitment among various experimental groups than did Latham et al.’s. In Erez, Earley, and Hulin (1985), for example, the range in goal commitment among subgroups was from 1.70 to 6.75 on a 7-point scale in the first study and 4.20 to 6.50 in the second. In Erez and Arad (1986) the range was 3.58 to 5.79. In Erez (1986) it was 4.24 to 5.91. In contrast the largest range reported by Latham within one study (on a 5-point scale) was 3.63 to 4.08 (Latham & Steele, 1983).

It is important to note that Latham and Erez actually agree about the effectiveness of participative goal setting; both found it to be effective. They disagree only about the effectiveness of assigned goal setting. Latham found it to be as effective as participative goal setting, whereas Erez did not. In order to resolve this contradiction, Erez, Latham, and Locke (1987) jointly designed and conducted four experiments. A key finding of these experiments was that the “Tell and Sell” style (cf. Maier, 1958; Tannenbaum & Schmidt, 1958) of assigning goals used by Latham and his.
colleagues was as effective as setting goals participatively, whereas the "Tell" style of assigning goals used by Erez and her colleagues was significantly less effective in terms of commitment and performance than setting goals participatively.

The effectiveness of different goal-setting styles may differ depending on cultural values. Erez and Earley (in press) found that assigned and participative goal setting produced similar effects on commitment, but different effects on performance among U.S. and Israeli subjects. (Commitment was correlated with performance for the Israelis but not for the U.S. subjects.) Americans performed equally well in both cases. The Israelis performed more poorly under assigned goals than participative goals, a result consonant with their more collectivistic value orientation (Hofstede, 1980). Latham used only American and Canadian subjects in his studies; they are certainly more individualistic than Kibbutz members. There are other differences between the Latham and Erez studies which may have contributed in minor ways to the differences in results (e.g., differential self-efficacy inductions; see Latham, Erez, & Locke, 1987 for details).

Another possible interactive factor is competition. Mueller (1983) tested Locke's (1968) hypothesis that competition can increase performance if it leads to the setting of and/or commitment to high goals. The hypothesis was supported with regard to goal difficulty. Subjects in the competitive condition set significantly higher goals and performed significantly better than those who were not in the competitive condition. However, competition did not affect the commitment of subjects in either the assigned or self-set goal conditions. It remains to be seen whether subsequent studies will show commitment as well as goal level effects of competition.

Internal Factors

Expectancy of Success and Self-Efficacy. Expectancy theorists (Dachler & Mobley, 1973; Vroom, 1964) argue that one's choices are affected by one's perceived chances of performing well on a task. Results of a number of studies indicate that commitment declines as the goal becomes more difficult and/or as the person's perceived chances of reaching it decline. A dramatic effect of commitment was obtained in the experiment noted earlier by Erez and Zidon (1984). In the second phase of a two-part experiment, technicians were shown bogus goal acceptance norms allegedly based on the responses of high level professionals. These norms suggested the appropriateness of low commitment to more difficult goals. The result was a high level of goal rejection and low performance in response to the more difficult goals.

Many studies find that goal commitment is lower for more objectively difficult goals (presumably associated with lower expectancies) than less objectively difficult goals (e.g., Dumont & Grimes, 1982; Earley, 1985a, 1985b; Erez, Earley, & Hulin, 1985; Hanges, 1987; Hannan, 1975; Locke, 1982; Locke, Frederick, Buckner, & Bobko, 1984). However, Huber (1985b), Oldham (1975), and Shalley and Oldham (1985) found no such effect, and Locke (1982) and Garland (1983) found that even impossible goals could motivate high performance in the short term. Huber and Neale (1986) and Mento et al. (1980) found that rated subjective expectancy of success significantly affected commitment.

Self-efficacy is related to expectancy of success. Bandura defines self-efficacy as a judgment of "how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations" (1982, p. 122; see also 1986). This concept, broader in scope than expectancy, includes a judgment of one's total capability of performing a task (see Gist, 1987). Because self-efficacy ratings are performance-based, they do not apply to goals as such. However, one could predict that the chances of accepting a hard goal would be higher when self-efficacy for a task is high as opposed to low. Bandura and Cervone (1983, 1986) found that when subjects were given feedback indicating performance below the level of the assigned goal, subsequent effort was higher for those with high self-efficacy than for those
with low self-efficacy. Locke, Frederick, Lee, and Bobko (1984) found that self-efficacy was significantly related to commitment to self-set goals, but not to assigned goals, a finding consistent with previous comments regarding restriction of range, since it was found that the variance in commitment was significantly higher for self-set than for assigned goals.

Earley (1985a) found that information about how to perform the task increased goal commitment, and Earley (1986) found that such information affected self-efficacy, and, thereby, goal commitment and performance. Earley (1985b) also found an effect of self-efficacy on goal commitment.

Self-Administered Rewards. Masters, Furman, and Barden (1977) found that self-administered rewards in the form of statements such as “I did very good [sic]” led to such dramatic improvements among 5- and 6-year-old children that subjects in all goal conditions reached asymptote. This did not occur when the children were given tangible prizes for goal attainment. Possibly the effect of the self-reward was to increase the children’s self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982) and thus commitment.

Ivancevich and McMahon (1982) found no relationship between goal commitment and performance. However, goal setting plus self-generated feedback led to higher organizational commitment and performance than did goal setting plus feedback given by the supervisor. The reason for this is not clear, but, perhaps, the self-generated feedback was either more accepted or seen as more meaningful than feedback provided by others. There may be a parallel here with the Masters et al. study (1977) described above in which self-reward had a greater effect on motivation than rewards given by others.

Discussion

This review has theoretical, methodological, and practical implications. Theoretically, it has been shown that there is a logical relationship between goal commitment and performance. Methodologically, such a relationship can be shown using various types of measures but requires the existence of a reasonable degree of variance in goal commitment. Leifer and McGannon’s finding (personal communication, 1987) that emotion-focused measures of commitment are more valid and produce more variance than cognitively focused measures is worth further exploration. Practically, the evidence regarding the factors that affect the degree (and, thus, by implication the range) of goal commitment has been summarized.

Legitimate authority is a key determinant of goal commitment. The relationship between goal commitment and authority was discussed many years ago by Barnard (1938) who proposed that the source of authority does not reside in the superior, but in the acceptance of that authority by subordinates. According to Barnard, individuals must assent to authority and will do so if (a) they understand the communicated order, (b) they believe that the order is consistent with organizational objectives and their personal interests, and (c) they are mentally and physically able to comply with the order. Barnard coined the concept zone of indifference within which orders will be accepted by a person without question. However, if obeying the order results in a negative balance, the person will no longer comply with authority. In most goal-setting studies, the instructions appear to have remained within the zone of indifference. More research on the effects of authority would be useful, especially regarding characteristics or actions of authority figures (e.g., physical presence, use of pressure, supportiveness, and trust) that affect commitment.

Gaining goal commitment also can be discussed and researched in the context of a wider organizational issue pertaining to the exercise of authority, that of leadership. It seems clear that productive goal setting for self and others (including identifying the organizational mission or purpose) is a key activity of successful managers and leaders (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Boyatzis, 1982; Kotter, 1982). Bennis and Nanus (1985) argued that communicating the goals or mission of the organization to subordinates in a way that
will be clear and compelling, that is, that will get subordinates committed, is a requirement of effective leadership (e.g., Locke & Somers, 1987). The same viewpoint has been expressed by Peters and Waterman (1982). They stressed the importance of managers reinforcing the core organizational values by taking value-relevant actions themselves (e.g., answering customer calls in order to emphasize the importance of good customer relations).

To better understand the effect of peer influence, more group goal-setting studies are needed. Studies of the effects of modeling would especially be useful (Bandura, 1986).

More studies need to use commitment measures and within-subject designs to see whether findings such as that by Mowen et al. (1981) regarding the effects of rewards can be explained by commitment differences.

Further research on the effects of participation on commitment may be of limited usefulness at this time since the reasons for the differences between Latham et al.'s and Erez et al.'s results now seem clear. A recent meta-analysis of participation studies by Wagner and Gooding (1986) found that, excluding percept-percept correlations, the mean correlation between participation and commitment was a mere $0.10^2 = 0.01$. Competition as a possible commitment-inducing activity is clearly in need of further study.

Since self-efficacy affects goal commitment, different ways of increasing self-efficacy should be examined. Bandura (1986) stressed enactive mastery (practice), modeling, and persuasion as the three key methods. However, Earley's (1986) results suggest that giving the employee task strategy information also can be a powerful way to raise confidence. Self-reward also merits further study.

The factors known to affect goal commitment not only have implications for future practice, but they also can help to explain (even reinterpret) the results of previous studies. Consider the famous Coch and French (1946) study of workers in a pajama factory. Despite the authority exercised by supervisors and an incentive bonus for goal attainment, workers routinely showed lowered productivity after product changeovers which involved the establishment of new standards and piece rates.

Coch and French observed that workers felt that they could not attain the new standards and banded together to restrict production at a low level. Thus, even though legitimate authority and incentives were present, there seemed to be a lack of trust and support, low self-efficacy, and group norms in opposition to the assigned standards. The low self-efficacy apparently negated the effect of the incentive, because the workers did not think they could produce enough to earn it.

Coch and French instituted a "participation" intervention that overcame worker resistance. However, Bartlem and Locke (1981) noted that the participative groups were given a much more detailed and compelling explanation of the need for the product change than was the control (nonparticipative) group. This difference may have been equivalent to the difference between the "Tell" and "Tell and Sell" styles—a distinction that explained in large part the contradictory findings of Erez and Latham regarding assigned goals.

In addition, participative groups in the Coch and French study were given additional training and new piece rates were set by studying the workers themselves rather than using standard times. Undoubtedly, the effect of these interventions would be to raise self-efficacy and trust. In turn, increased self-efficacy would make the incentives effective because the workers would believe that they could attain them. Thus these delineated factors seem to explain both the rejection of goals by the control group and the acceptance of goals by the experimental groups.

Unfortunately, not enough is known about the relative importance of the various determinants of goal commitment to permit meaningful predictions of their effects on commitment when there are conflicting elements. This should be the subject of future studies. Bandura (1986) indicated that low self-efficacy can negate the effects of
and may adversely influence performance as well as affect (stress, etc.). For example, an individual may be rewarded for one type of activity (e.g., quantity of production) while being asked to make another activity a top priority (e.g., making quality products). Less commitment to both quantity and quality goals or lowered commitment to one at the expense of the other could result.

Finally, McCaul, Hinsz, and McCaul (in press) found that when subjects publicly announced their goals in a group setting and posted their names and goals publicly, this lead to higher reported commitment and greater task persistence (but not performance level) than when these were stated privately on a questionnaire. Public announcement of the goal is an issue that harks back to Lewin's (1947, 1952) classic studies of methods of changing food habits. Lewin, however, did not manipulate public vs. private announcement as a separate variable. The McCaul et al. study suggests that this variable is worth further exploration.

References


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