

Goal Setting

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In N. Nicholson, R. Schuler and A. Van de Ven (Eds.), *Dictionary of Organizational Behavior*, 1995. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Goal-Setting is a theory of motivation that was originally developed by Locke (1968) to explain human action in specific work situations. The underlying assumptions of the theory are that goals and intentions are cognitive and volitional, and that they serve as the immediate regulators of human action. The two major findings of the theory are that specific goals lead to higher performance levels than general goals, and that difficult goals are positively and linearly related to performance. These effects are subject to two conditions - feedback, and the acceptance of goals by the performers. Goals regulate behavior through three mechanisms: choice/direction, intensity/effort/resource allocation, and duration/persistence. The effect of goal-setting in complex tasks is regulated by a fourth mechanism of strategy development, which is necessary for reaching the goal. The two unique characteristics of the goal-setting theory that make it more effective than any other theory of motivation to date are its strong empirical basis, and its continuous process of development.

The original model of the goal-setting theory (Locke, 1968) consisted of a sequential process of five steps: Environmental Stimuli--->Cognition--->Evaluation--->Intentions/Goal-setting--->Performance. Goal-Setting theory was developed by starting with goals and intentions as the two conscious motivational factors closest to the action. It then worked backward progressively to the preceding stages of evaluation, cognition, and environmental stimuli. The term *goal* was introduced

in the first phase (intentions/goal-setting). It refers to attaining a specific standard of proficiency on a given task, usually within a specified time limit. Goals have two main attributes: content and intensity. Goal content refers to the object or result being sought, e.g. producing 10% more units, reaching an executive position within 10 years. Goal difficulty specifies a certain level of standard of task proficiency. Goal intensity refers to the importance of the goal to the performer, which is expressed by goal commitment, effort, and the amount of resources that an individual is willing to allocate to obtain the goal. The parsimony of the early research paradigm which focused on the relationship between goals and performance allowed to establish the strong empirical support to the effect of goal specificity and difficulty on performance. Once these basic relationships were established, the focus shifted backward to the *evaluation phase*, and the next step of theory development began. Four important variables that are evaluative by nature, serve to explain mediating and moderating effects on the goal - performance relationship: feedback, or knowledge of results, expectancies, self-efficacy, and goal commitment. *Feedback* pertains to performance evaluation relative to the goal, and it was identified as a necessary condition for goals to affect performance (Erez, 1977). The combination of feedback and goals leads to the highest performance level. Feedback may have negative effects on performance when it shifts resources to off-task processes of self-regulation, in particular for individuals with low levels of self-efficacy (Kanfer, 1990). *Self-efficacy* is a judgement of one's capability to accomplish a certain level of performance (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between goals and performance as follows: Goal difficulty positively affects perceptions of self-efficacy, which further affect intentions, personal goals, and performance. Expectancies reflect the evaluations people make of their chance to

obtain goals. For a given level of goal difficulty, individuals with high rather than low expectancies are more likely to obtain their goals. Perceptions of self-efficacy, and expectancies determine the level of goal attractivity which influences goal acceptance. *Goal acceptance* refers to initial agreement with the goal, whereas *goal commitment* refers to adherence to the goal, and resistance to changing the goal at a later point in time (Tubbs, 1993). Research has demonstrated that goal commitment moderates the effect of goal difficulty on performance. A significant drop-off in performance is observed as goal commitment declines in response to increasingly difficult goals (Erez & Zidon, 1984). Feedback and goal commitment were identified as the two necessary conditions for goals to affect performance. The important role played by goal commitment has led to a growing interest in the antecedents of goal-commitment. Participation in goal-setting was found to be an effective method for enhancing goal commitment.[Cite Locke, Latham & Erez, 88; Hollnebeck, 1989; Tubbs, 91,93].(Latham, Erez, & Locke, 1988; Locke, Latham & Erez, 1988). Locke, 1991, p.293 Evaluation is guided by *values*, which determine what people want or what they consciously consider beneficial to their welfare. Goals can be viewed as applications of values to specific situations. In a recent model of the motivation sequence Locke (1991) identified values as the motivation core that mediates between needs, which begin the motivation sequence, and goals. There is an increasing interest in determining how personal values are modified, and what is the role played by heredity, and by the social and cultural background in shaping values .

In parallel to the continuous research on the evaluation phase there is a growing interest in cognition which precedes evaluation. *Cognition* draws attention to paradigms of complex tasks, and multiple goals. The magnitude of goal effects on performance decreases as task complexity

increases. Research on goal-setting effects in the complex task paradigm reveals that goals affect performance to the extent that they lead to the development of effective plans and strategies. However, very often, goals generate pressure for immediate results and they become counterproductive when planning and strategy development is required. The negative effect of goals on the performance of complex tasks is mainly observed at initial stages of skill acquisition (Kanfer, 1990).

Research in the multiple goal paradigm is guided by the assumption that the human organism has a pool of limited resources. As a result, there is a trade-off relationship in the performance of multiple goals. Empirical research has demonstrated that more resources are shifted to the attainment of specific and difficult goals than general or easy goals, and to the attainment of performance goals which are supported by feedback. Of special interest is the trade-off relationship between quantity and quality goals .

It seems that the most recent stage in the process of theory development is that of characteristics of the environmental stimuli. Research in this area examines goals in different contextual levels - individual goals, group goals (Weldon & Gargano, 1988), and the effect of significant others, and of cultural values on goal choice and goal commitment (Bandura, 1986, 1991; Erez & Earley, 1993). Monetary rewards serve as another situational factor which mediates, as well as moderates the effect of goals on performance. Monetary incentives increase goal commitment, but at the same time they inhibit the attainment of complementary goals which are not compensated for (Wright, George, Farnsworth, & McMahan, 1993). To summarize, the continuous development of the goal-setting theory integrates different motivational theories into one coherent model. In its present development, the goal-setting theory is identified as a meta-cognitive theory of self-

regulation, with a growing emphasis on the underlying cognitive resource allocation processes (Kanfer, 1990).

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