

Locke's Goal Setting Theory

Understanding SMART Goal Setting

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Goal setting is a powerful way of motivating people, and of motivating yourself. The value of goal setting is so well recognized that entire management systems, like **Management by Objectives**, have goal setting basics incorporated within them.

In fact, goal setting theory is generally accepted as among the most valid and useful motivation theories in industrial and organizational psychology, human resource management, and organizational behavior.

Many of us have learned – from bosses, seminars, and business articles – to set **SMART** goals. It seems natural to assume that by setting a goal that's Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound, we will be well on our way to accomplishing it.

But is this really the best way of setting goals?

To answer this, we look to Dr Edwin Locke's pioneering research on goal setting and motivation in the late 1960s. In his 1968 article "Toward a Theory of Task Motivation and Incentives," he stated that employees were motivated by clear goals and appropriate feedback. Locke went on to say that working toward a goal provided a major source of motivation to actually reach the goal – which, in turn, improved performance.

This information does not seem revolutionary to us some 40 years later. This shows the impact his theory has had on professional and personal performance.

In this article, we look at what Locke had to say about goal setting, and how we can apply his theory to our own performance goals.

Goal Setting Theory

Locke's research showed that there was a relationship between how difficult and specific a goal was and people's performance of a task. He found that specific and difficult goals led to better task performance than vague or easy goals.

Telling someone to "Try hard" or "Do your best" is less effective than "Try to get more than 80% correct" or "Concentrate on beating your best time." Likewise, having a goal that's too easy is not a motivating force. Hard goals are more motivating than easy goals, because it's much more of an accomplishment to achieve something that you have to work for.

A few years after Locke published his article, another researcher, Dr Gary Latham, studied the effect of goal setting in the workplace. His results supported exactly what Locke had found, and the inseparable link between goal setting and workplace performance was formed.

In 1990, Locke and Latham published their seminal work, "A Theory of Goal Setting and Task Performance." In this book, they reinforced the need to set specific and difficult goals, and they outlined three other characteristics of successful goal setting.

Five Principles of Goal Setting

To motivate, goals must have:

1. Clarity.
2. Challenge.
3. Commitment.
4. Feedback.
5. Task complexity.



Let's look at each of these in detail.

1. Clarity

Clear goals are measurable and unambiguous. When a goal is clear and specific, with a definite time set for completion, there is less misunderstanding about what behaviors will be rewarded. You know what's expected, and you can use the specific result as a source of motivation. When a goal is vague – or when it's expressed as a general instruction, like "Take initiative" – it has limited motivational value.

To improve your or your team's performance, set clear goals that use specific and measurable standards. "Reduce job turnover by 15%" or "Respond to employee suggestions within 48 hours" are examples of clear goals.

When you use the SMART acronym to help you set goals, you ensure the clarity of the goal by making it Specific, Measurable and Time-bound.

2. Challenge

One of the most important characteristics of goals is the level of challenge. People are often motivated by achievement, and they'll judge a goal based on the significance of the anticipated accomplishment. When you know that what you do will be well received, there's a natural motivation to do a good job.

Rewards typically increase for more difficult goals. If you believe you'll be well compensated or otherwise rewarded for achieving

a challenging goal, that will boost your enthusiasm and your drive to get it done.

Setting SMART goals that are Relevant links them closely to the rewards given for achieving challenging goals. Relevant goals will further the aims of your organization, and these are the kinds of goals that most employers will be happy to reward.

When setting goals, make each goal a challenge. If an assignment is easy and not viewed as very important – and if you or your employee doesn't expect the accomplishment to be significant – then the effort may not be impressive.

Note:

It's important to strike an appropriate balance between a challenging goal and a realistic goal. Setting a goal that you'll fail to achieve is possibly more de-motivating than setting a goal that's too easy. The need for success and achievement is strong, therefore people are best motivated by challenging, but realistic, goals. Ensuring that goals are Achievable or Attainable is one of the elements of SMART.

3. Commitment

Goals must be understood and agreed upon if they are to be effective. Employees are more likely to "buy into" a goal if they feel they were part of creating that goal. The notion of participative management rests on this idea of involving employees in setting goals and making decisions.

One version of SMART – for use when you are working with someone else to set their goals – has A and R stand for Agreed and Realistic instead of Attainable and Relevant. Agreed goals lead to commitment.

This doesn't mean that every goal has to be negotiated with and approved by employees. It does mean that goals should be consistent and in line with previous expectations and organizational concerns. As long as the employee believes that the goal is consistent with the goals of the company, and believes the person assigning the goal is credible, then the commitment should be there.

Interestingly, goal commitment and difficulty often work together. The harder the goal, the more commitment is required. If you have an easy goal, you don't need a lot of motivation to get it done. When you're working on a difficult assignment, you will likely encounter challenges that require a deeper source of inspiration and incentive.

As you use goal setting in your workplace, make an appropriate effort to include people in their own goal setting. Encourage employees to develop their own goals, and keep them informed about what's happening elsewhere in the organization. This way, they can be sure that their goals are consistent with the overall vision and purpose that the company seeks.

4. Feedback

In addition to selecting the right type of goal, an effective goal program must also include **feedback**. Feedback provides opportunities to clarify expectations, adjust goal difficulty, and gain recognition. It's important to provide benchmark opportunities or targets, so individuals can determine for themselves how they're doing.

These regular progress reports, which measure specific success along the way, are particularly important where it's going to take a long time to reach a goal. In these cases, break down the goals into smaller chunks, and link feedback to these intermediate

milestones.

SMART goals are Measurable, and this ensures that clear feedback can be provided.

With all your goal setting efforts, make sure that you build in time for providing formal feedback. Certainly, informal check-ins are important, and they provide a means of giving regular encouragement and recognition. However, taking the time to sit down and discuss goal performance is a necessary factor in long-term performance improvement. See our article on Delegation for more on this.

5. Task Complexity

The last factor in goal setting theory introduces two more requirements for success. For goals or assignments that are highly complex, take special care to ensure that the work doesn't become too overwhelming.

People who work in complicated and demanding roles probably have a high level of motivation already. However, they can often push themselves too hard if measures aren't built into the goal expectations to account for the complexity of the task. It's therefore important to do the following:

- Give the person sufficient time to meet the goal or improve performance.
- Provide enough time for the person to practice or learn what is expected and required for success.

The whole point of goal setting is to facilitate success. Therefore, you want to make sure that the conditions surrounding the goals don't frustrate or inhibit people from accomplishing their objectives. This reinforces the "Attainable" part of SMART.

Key Points

Goal setting is something most of us recognize as necessary for our success.

By understanding goal setting theory, you can effectively apply the principles to goals that you or your team members set. Locke and Latham's research confirms the usefulness of SMART goal setting, and their theory continues to influence the way we measure performance today.

Use clear, challenging goals, and commit yourself to achieving them. Provide feedback on goal performance. Take into consideration the complexity of the task. If you follow these simple rules, your goal setting process will be much more successful, and your overall performance will improve.