

THE EFFECTS OF SELF-SET, PARTICIPATIVELY SET AND ASSIGNED GOALS ON THE PERFORMANCE OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES

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A government agency wished to define effective supervisory behavior. Fifty-seven government employees participated in the job analysis. The employees were randomly assigned to one of three goal setting conditions, namely, self-set, participatively set, and assigned goals. The task required each individual to brainstorm individually job behaviors that he or she had seen make the difference between effective and ineffective job behavior as a supervisor. Goals were set in terms of the number of behaviors to be listed within 20 minutes. There was no significant difference in goal difficulty between those with participatively set goals and those with self-set goals. Goal difficulty was held constant between the participative and assigned goal conditions by imposing a goal agreed upon by an employee in the participative condition upon an employee in the assigned condition. There was no significant difference among the three goal setting conditions regarding goal acceptance or actual performance. This was true regardless of employee age, education, position level, years as a supervisor, or time employed in the public sector. The correlation between goal difficulty and performance was .62, .69, and .74, respectively, in the participative, self-set, and assigned goal conditions.

A review of both laboratory and field studies on the effects of setting a specific hard goal prior to performing a task shows that specific, challenging goals lead to higher performance than easy goals, "do your best" goals, or the setting of no goals at all (Locke,

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Shaw, Saari, and Latham, 1981). This is one of the most robust and replicable findings in the psychological literature with 90% of the studies showing positive results (Locke, et al. 1981).

A second finding that has received modest support in the goal setting literature is that there seems to be few consistent differences between assigned and participatively set goals with respect to productivity (Dossett, Latham, and Mitchell, 1979; Latham and Saari, 1979a,b; Latham, Mitchell and Dossett, 1978). That is, when the goal difficulty level is held constant, performance is the same regardless of whether the goal is assigned or decided upon mutually by a supervisor and a subordinate.

The above finding has been demonstrated only twice in a field setting where the phenomenon was investigated using a rigorous experimental design. In those two studies (Dossett, Latham, and Mitchell, 1979), female clerical workers employed in private industry were involved in the validation of a selection test, and were later studied in the context of three consecutive performance appraisals.

In the validation study, Dossett et al. found that the performance of employees who participated in setting their goals as to the number of items they would answer was not significantly greater than individuals who were assigned goals. In the performance appraisal study, assigned goals resulted in higher performance and greater goal acceptance than did participatively set goals. However, there was no significant difference on these measures between the two goal setting conditions after the second and third appraisal periods 4 months and 8 months after the initial appraisal.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the importance of assigned versus participative goal setting in another field setting. A government agency was interested in defining effective supervisory behavior. The authors suggested that one approach to job analysis would be to have employees list what they believe, on the basis of first-hand observation, constitutes effective job behavior. This suggestion is in accordance with the 1978 Civil Service Reform Act (see Latham and Wexley, 1981, for an overview). In brief, the Act states that each federal agency should develop appraisal systems that encourage employee participation in establishing performance standards. The standards are to be based on critical elements of the job.

Because of the emphasis on employee involvement in establishing standards, we decided to investigate self-set goals in addition to assigned and participatively set goals. The goals set dealt with the number of standards or individual job behaviors that each person could list as critical for performance as a supervisor.

The importance of goal setting to this task is that a job analysis must yield content valid information. This is, it must yield information that constitutes a representative sampling of the critical job behaviors in question. If each person contributing to the job analysis lists only three or four behaviors, the job analysis may yield information defining effective supervisory behavior that is not comprehensive.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 57 supervisors in a governmental agency. The supervisors were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: participatively set, self set, and assigned goals.

Procedure

All subjects were told that a job analysis was being conducted to define effective supervisory behavior. The importance of obtaining comprehensive information was stressed.

Employees in the self-set goal condition were asked to specify the number of observable behaviors that they could list within 20 minutes. It was emphasized that the goal should be difficult but attainable.

In the participative condition, the authors used the results from a pilot study to determine whether a goal was "difficult but attainable." If the goal set by an employee was too high or too low, the individual was reminded that the goal should be truly difficult, but attainable; "are you sure that a goal of ___ fits that description?" The person was then asked to set another goal.

Three employees, one in each condition, were run concurrently. Thus, it was possible to assign the goal agreed upon by the experimenter and the individual in the participative condition to the employee in the assigned condition. The people in this latter condition were told that results from previous work conducted by the authors indicated that this was a reasonable goal for them to attain.

In each condition, the employees were told to number their ideas so as to provide knowledge of results regarding goal attainment, and to continue working regardless of goal attainment until the 20 minutes elapsed. Before the employees began working, the experimenter made the statement: "Remember your goal is at least ___ ideas."

Goal Measures

Productivity was defined as the number of job behaviors listed. Goal acceptance was measured by responses to a three item, 7-point scale. The items were as follows:

- (a) To what extent did you accept the goal?
- (b) How difficult did you perceive the goal to be?
- (c) How reasonable did you perceive the goal to be?

Moderator Variables

Individual differences in personality and demographic information were measured to determine if they acted as moderators of the goal setting condition-performance relationship. The personality variables of interest in this study were: internal-external control, need for achievement, need for affiliation, need for autonomy, need for dominance, achievement via conformance and achievement via independence. Internal-external control was measured by using a shortened version (25 item) of the I-E Scale (Rotter, 1966). The four items dealing with education were deleted. The needs for achievement, affiliation, autonomy and dominance were measured using the Manifest Needs Questionnaire developed by Steers and Braunstein (1976). Achievement via conformance and achievement via independence were measured by using the two appropriate scales taken from the California Psychological Inventory by Gough (1956). Demographic information examined included age, education, occupational category, level in the organization, number of years in supervision, number of staff supervised, and time employed in the public sector.

Results

Manipulation Check

Each individual was asked, "In relation to the experimenter, to what extent do you feel you influenced the goal which was set?" A one-way analysis of variance indicated that the experimental conditions differed significantly ($F = 46.26, p < .01$). The individuals in the self-set ($\bar{X} = 6.21, SD = 1.13$) and the participative conditions ($\bar{X} = 5.74, SD = 1.63$) believed they had significantly more influence in setting the goal than did individuals in the assigned ($\bar{X} = 2.47, SD = 1.68$) condition ($t = 8.32, p < .01; t = 6.09, p < .01$, respectively). There was no significant difference between the perceptions of those

with self-set versus participatively set goals, even though the experimenter in the latter condition was permitted to "jaw-bone" if the goal set was unrealistically high or low.

Goal Acceptance

A series of one-way analyses of variance indicated that the individuals in the three goal setting conditions did not differ significantly in their responses to the goal acceptance items in total or individually. All individuals accepted their goals.

Performance

Goal difficulty was held constant between the assigned and participatively set goals. The goal that was agreed upon jointly by the experimenter and an employee in the participative condition was assigned to an employee in the assigned condition. This was obviously not possible in the self-set condition. Thus a *t*-test was conducted to see if self-set goals were significantly different from those set in the participative condition. The means and standard deviations were 12.84 (*SD* = 7.52) and 12.42 (*SD* = 6.47) for the self and participatively set conditions, respectively. This difference was not significant.

Goal attainment did not differ significantly among the three goal setting conditions. Eighty-four percent of the people in each condition attained their goals.

Productivity, as defined by the number of items generated, did not differ among the three conditions. The means and standard deviations for the self-set, participative, and assigned goals were 15.00 (*SD* = 5.93), 18.26 (*SD* = 9.12) and 16.63 (*SD* = 8.08), respectively. The correlation between participative, self-set, and assigned goals with performance was .62, .69, and .74, respectively. These correlations were significant at the .01 level. There was no significant difference among these correlations.

Moderator Variables

The employees were split at the median with regard to their scores on the personality tests. No main or interaction effects were obtained. Similarly, no main or interaction effects were found for employee age, years of postsecondary education, positive level, number of staff supervised, number of years in supervisory positions, or time employed in the public sector.

Discussion

Previous research has consistently shown that specific hard goals lead to higher performance than not setting goals (Locke et al., 1980). The present study provides further support for the proposition that the issue of *how* a goal is set is not as important as *whether* the goal is set (Latham, Mitchell, and Dossett, 1978; Meyer, Kay, and French, 1965). Participation in itself does not appear to affect productivity. Nor does giving an employee a complete say in decision making appear to affect productivity. The key issue to productivity appears to be the setting of specific goals.

The theoretical value of this study is that it has extended the external validity of this finding to a different task, namely job analysis, and to a different population, namely government employees.

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