

EXCERPT #4

Seijts, G., Latham, G., Tasa, K., & Latham, B. (2004). Goal setting and goal orientation: An integration of two different yet related literatures. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47, 227-240.

LEARNING VERSUS PERFORMANCE GOALS

Using an air traffic control simulation, a highly complex task, Kanfer and Ackerman (1989) found that when people lacked the knowledge or skill to perform the task effectively, urging them to set a specific high goal with regard to the results to be attained led to a decrease rather than an increase in performance, relative to urging them to do their best. They concluded that this pattern occurred because, when people are in the “declarative” stage of learning, before performance routines have become automatic, their cognitive resources need to be allocated to mastering the processes required to perform well rather than to the attainment of a specific level of performance.

Winters and Latham (1996) showed that the type of goal set explains the results obtained by Kanfer and Ackerman. When a task was straightforward for people, Winters and Latham found that setting a specific high performance goal led to higher performance than did urging people to do their best. This finding replicated countless other goal setting studies. But when a task required the acquisition of knowledge, they replicated Kanfer and Ackerman’s finding that urging people to do their best led to higher performance than the setting of a specific challenging performance goal. However, when a specific high learning goal (for instance, discover *n* strategies to perform a task effectively) was set, performance was even higher than it was when people were urged to do their best...

Setting a high performance goal is effective only when people already have the ability to perform a particular task effectively. On a task that requires learning, a specific challenging learning goal should be set. A learning goal shifts attention to the discovery and implementation of task-relevant strategies or procedures and away from task outcome achievement. This is because tasks that are novel or complex for an individual often require attentional resources for learning what is required in order to perform them well (Kanfer, 1990; Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989; Locke, 2000). For tasks that a person already has the requisite ability to perform effectively, a learning goal that needlessly focuses attention on discovering strategies—rather than on attaining a specific level of performance—has a deleterious effect on performance (Winters & Latham, 1996). These findings have high practical significance.

Two real-world scenarios can illustrate. A dean or department chair should assign a specific high *learning* goal to an assistant professor who is inexperienced in the classroom. The assistant professor should focus on the discovery of five to seven strategies, processes, or procedures ... for obtaining high student evaluations. Assigning a specific challenging performance goal (such as obtaining student evaluations of 6 or higher on a 7-point scale) before the professor’s teaching routines have become “automatic” is likely to lead to “scrambling” on the part of the teacher, and subsequent rejection by the students. Similarly, a novice golfer in the declarative stage of learning should set a specific high *learning* goal rather than a high *performance* goal. A score of, say, 70 would be a high performance goal in the case of this game. The (more desirable) learning goal might be mastering the proper grip of the club or proper placement of the feet, learning when to use what club, or understanding the distribution of weight from one foot to the other when swinging the club.

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