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Combining performance, learning, and behavioral goals to match job with person: Three steps to enhance employee performance with goal setting

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Abstract   While there have been many articles written on the advantages and techniques of goal setting, there has been far less written to guide practicing managers on how to put this powerful motivational tool to work. This article offers a three-step process that begins by identifying the combination of performance, learning, and behavioral goals to best match the unique knowledge, skills, and abilities of the employee to the task requirements of the job. Once this best-goal combination has been determined, the manager's letter, a managerial tool developed by Peter Drucker, is presented as a well-accepted process for implementing a goal-setting strategy that emphasizes employee participation. The third step in the implementation of a goal-setting strategy is to introduce subconscious primes that can reinforce the value of setting performance, learning, and behavioral goals.
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1. Strategic goal setting

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"
"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.
"I don't much care where—" said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.
"—so long as I get SOMEWHERE," Alice added as an explanation.
"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

This often-quoted excerpt from *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865), about how it makes no difference what direction you go if you don't much care where you are going, is an apt introduction to the use and

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value of goal setting in organizations. Since the publication of the seminal work by Locke and Latham (1990) on the importance of setting high and specific but attainable goals in enhancing employee productivity, thousands of articles have been written about this important motivational technique (Latham, 2012; Locke & Latham, 2002). Today, there is no question that this goal-setting work—which is parallel to, but separate from, the classic management by objectives work of Peter Drucker (1954), George Odiorne (1965), and others—has made a convincing case for the value of setting goals and objectives for and with employees in organizations.

On the other hand, there is little value in setting goals if the person with set goals does not know how to perform the tasks. To reverse the aforementioned *Alice in Wonderland* phrase, it does not matter if you know exactly where you are going if you have no idea of how to get there. And, to take this logic one step further, it does not matter if you know exactly where you are going and have the ability to get there but are unwilling to put forth the effort to go there—either because you do not believe you can do it or you do not want to. In other words, the large body of research on goal setting points to the joint influence of knowing what to do, having the ability to do it, and believing that by expending effort on the task the person can do it (Seijts & Latham, 2012). Thus, there are three types of goals that managers can use to influence desired employee outcomes: (1) performance goals, (2) learning goals, and (3) behavioral goals (Latham & Seijts, 2016).

Performance goals are specific outcomes that employees agree to accomplish. *Learning goals* are specific skills and knowledge areas that an employee agrees to master in order to pursue a specific performance goal successfully. *Behavioral goals* are set to define behaviors that a person needs to do in order to achieve success. In some respects, behaviors result from a need to achieve or obtain some desired result, but in other respects, behaviors result from one's belief that he or she can actually do what needs to be done. Put more simply, a person's self-efficacy or belief that he or she can perform the task is a necessary component in the attainment of a specific outcome.

This leads us to suggest that there are contingencies concerning both the person and the job role's tasks that will determine the types of goals managers should use, individually and in combination, to obtain the desired employee performance. The purpose of this article is to propose a three-step approach for practicing managers to use that will enhance employee performance through the strategic use of goal setting. The first step of this approach requires a manager to assess the mix of performance, learning, and behavioral goals that best fit the characteristics of the tasks with those of the employee. The second step uses Drucker's manager's letter approach to ensure that managers, working with employees, set SMART goals (i.e., Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Reasonable, and Time-limited). Third, I provide suggestions based on subconscious goal setting and priming research addressing how managers can reinforce each goal and help motivate their employees to achieve these goals.

1.1. Step 1: Identifying the fit between job and person

In this first step, the contingencies are defined and show how the identification of the match between individual and tasks will determine the best combination of goals to increase performance. In the cube below (see Figure 1), different situations are presented that call for heavier versus lighter emphasis on performance, learning, or behavioral goals in some optimal combination. After explaining each of the eight possible combinations, I offer guidelines for determining which goal-setting strategy to follow in each.

Each combination defines a managerial strategy for determining the best fit between an employee and the tasks that the employee must perform in a specific job role. The logic is straightforward. In all organizational roles there are multiple tasks that make up an employee's job. Some tasks are well known to the employee, while others are brand new. The well-known task is the ideal situation for setting performance goals. The brand new task is the ideal for setting learning goals. Service tasks—in which there is interaction between customer (internal or external) and employee and employees must display desired behaviors while interacting with customers to produce a positive experience—are ideal for setting behavioral goals. This model, along with the eight categories it describes, shows that all job roles call for some ideal combination of the three types of goals managers should set for employees. Some roles will include tasks that require a heavy emphasis on performance goals, while others will require a heavy emphasis on learning goals, and still others will require a heavy emphasis on behavioral goals. This does not mean, as the model shows, that when one type of goal is emphasized heavily the other two types are ignored. It does mean that different types of tasks, which different types of employees are performing, will require a manager to attend to the unique situation of each task-employee combination in selecting a goal-setting strategy. One combination of goals will not fit all employees in a job