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# A great spat over goals

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# A great spat over goals

When academics clash antlers in ritual ruttings over research, the issues under contention can be of marginal interest to practitioners. But the recent spat over the value of goals, in *Academy of Management Perspectives* has significance for anyone working at a serious level in coaching or mentoring. Goal management is frequently positioned as being at the heart of effective coaching, although David Megginson and I have increasingly questioned the validity and utility of an excessive or premature focus on goals as the drivers of the learning relationship. Goal management, in the form of management by objectives, is now so ingrained in management practice that hardly anyone bothers to teach it any more – it is integrated into performance management.

The recent argument concerns an article<sup>1</sup> written by four academics, Lisa Ordonez, from the University of Arizona, Maurice Schweitzer, from Wharton, Adam Gaklinsky, from Kellogg, and Max Bazerman, from Harvard, who have collectively attacked what they describe as “overprescribing goal setting”. In doing so, they have taken on the established kings of the herd, the doyens of goal theory and goals research, the duo of Gary Latham and Edwin Locke<sup>2</sup>, who provide a stinging riposte<sup>3</sup>, attacking the science (or claimed lack of it) behind this assault on now established theories of goal management.

At the heart is the claim by Locke and Latham that “So long as a person is committed to the goal, has the required ability to attain it, and does not have conflicting goals, there is a positive, linear relationship between goal difficulty and task performance.” Many writers on goals build on this relationship to infer that the more specific the goal is (the SMARTer it is), the more likely it is to be achieved, but the evidence for this assertion is thin at best.

Ordonez’ and her colleagues’ arguments against putting organisational effort into ensuring people set and pursue clearly defined goals can be summarised as follows:

- Because goals focus attention, they reduce people’s attentiveness to other factors that may help them achieve or contribute more. The lack of context (staring at the ground rather than seeing the trees) makes it easier to focus on the wrong goals. (I would add that it also makes people less able to recognise when a goal has become inappropriate.)
- Narrow, short-term goals tend to promote “myopic, short-term behaviour that harms the organisation in the long run”
- “People motivated by specific, challenging goals tend to adopt riskier strategies... than do those with less challenging or vague goals
- Goal setting can induce unethical behaviour, especially where people just miss challenging goals

- “Goals inhibit learning” – “An individual who is narrowly focused on a performance goal will be less likely to try alternative methods that could help her learn how to perform a task”
- Goals may increase extrinsic motivation, but they may also harm intrinsic motivation

There is some empirical evidence for all of these statements, but again, not a lot.

The pushback from Locke and Latham focuses primarily on the nature of the evidence provided in support of this attack on goals, which they (rightly in my view) castigate for being primarily anecdotal. However, Locke and Latham themselves recognise the dark side of goals<sup>4</sup> and have actively attempted to highlight the dangers of unintelligent or inappropriate goal-focus.

It’s all reminiscent of the arguments in the field of mentoring a decade and more ago, between US academics, who maintained that informal mentoring was inferior to formal mentoring, while practitioners, mainly in Europe, pointed to strong case study evidence that demonstrated the contrary. It all pivoted on failures by both sides – the practitioners in gathering sufficiently robust quantitative data; and the academics in lamentable methodological failures, including not ensuring that respondents had the same definitions of mentoring, inadequate definitions of formality and informality, and conflating radically different situations (e.g. direct reporting and off-line relationships). It was all resolved by a quantitative study that took these criticisms into account and found that the level of formality or informality was largely irrelevant – what counted was the quality of relationship, however it originated. Almost all the same charges could be levelled in this clash of titans.

It’s all very confusing. Some clarity may be achieved by picking apart a) what do we mean by goals and b) the role that goals play in different contexts. Goals may be long term or short term, specific or broadly based, internally or externally generated (or a mixture of both), individual or shared with others. They may represent moving away from something or towards something. They may also be at one of several levels of emergence, from an instinctive, unarticulated feeling that something needs to change, to a half-formed question, through questions of greater perspicacity, up to a fully articulated statement of purposeful intent.

### **So how does all this apply to coaching and mentoring?**

Understanding what kind and level of goal the client is working with is an important first step in grounding the coaching or mentoring relationship.

My own researches into the role of goals in mentoring<sup>5</sup> investigate the relationship between three goal measures - clarity, commitment and alignment (shared sense of purpose for the relationship), the perceived quality of the mentoring relationship and four categories of relationship outcome.

There were no statistically significant associations between goal clarity and goal commitment and relationship quality or outcomes; however, there were moderate to strong associations with goal alignment.

From this and the reports of hundreds of coaches, mentors and their clients in workshops, we are increasingly drawn to the conclusion that, in the context of the developmental dyad:

- Goals are often emergent (they may be the end, not the beginning of the mentoring or coaching process)
- Goals tend to be longer term and broader than in simple skills acquisition or short-term performance management
- Reflection around the goal appears to be as important, if not more important than specific actions towards achieving it

What all this reinforces is the need for some good science to investigate the role and nature of goals in coaching. Hence the recent decision by the EMCC's UK research committee to support a proposal from me and David Megginson at Sheffield Hallam University's Coaching and Mentoring Unit to investigate how goals evolve within the developmental dyad. The core of this research is for volunteer coaches and their clients to maintain a learning log of what has happened in their relationships with regard to when goals were set, how specific those goals were, how they changed, when and how the coachee developed a clear perception of how the goals would be achieved and what actually happened with those goals over a six to 12 month period.

We are now starting to gather volunteers – we want at least 50 for the first phase of the project. If you would like to take part, please contact us on [info@clutterbuckassociates.co.uk](mailto:info@clutterbuckassociates.co.uk).