Locke's Goal-Setting Theory
Setting Meaningful, Challenging Goals

What you get by achieving your goals is not as important as what you become by achieving your goals.
– Michelangelo Buonarroti, Renaissance artist

Many of us have learned – from bosses, seminars and business articles – the importance of setting ourselves SMART objectives. We know that "SMART" stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound. But are these the only factors to consider if we want to achieve our goals?

Dr Edwin Locke and Dr Gary Latham spent many years researching the theory of goal setting, during which time they identified five elements that need to be in place for us to achieve our goals.

In this article, we’ll look at their research, and find out how to apply it to our own goals.

About Locke and Latham's Theory

In the late 1960s, Locke’s pioneering research into goal setting and motivation gave us our modern understanding of goal setting. In his 1968 article "Toward a Theory of Task Motivation and Incentives," he showed that clear goals and appropriate feedback motivate employees. He went on to highlight that working toward a goal is also a major source of motivation – which, in turn, improves performance.

Locke’s research showed that the more difficult and specific a goal is, the harder people tend to work to achieve it.

In one study, Locke reviewed a decade's worth of laboratory and field studies on the effects of goal setting and performance. He found that, for 90 percent of the time, specific and challenging (but not too challenging) goals led to higher performance than easy, or "do your best," goals.

For example, telling someone to "try hard" or "do your best" is less effective than saying "try to get more than 80 percent correct," or "concentrate on beating your best time." Likewise, having a goal that's too easy is not motivating. Hard goals are more motivating than easy ones, because it feels more of an accomplishment to achieve something you've worked hard for.

A few years after Locke published his article, Dr Gary Latham studied the effects of goal setting in the workplace. His results supported Locke’s findings – that there is an inseparable link between goal setting and workplace performance.

In 1990, Locke and Latham published their seminal work, "A Theory of Goal Setting & Task Performance." In this book, they repeated the need to set specific and difficult goals, while outlining five other characteristics for successful goal setting.

Locke and Latham's Five Principles

According to Locke and Latham, there are five goal setting principles that can improve our chances of success:

1. Clarity.
2. Challenge.
3. Commitment.
Let's look at each of these elements, and explore how you can apply them to your personal goals and to your team's objectives.

1. Setting Clear Goals

When your goals are clear, you know what you’re trying to achieve. You can also measure results accurately, and you know which behaviors to reward. This is why SMART is such a useful mnemonic.

However, when a goal is vague – or when you express it as a general instruction like “take initiative” – it isn’t easy to measure, and it isn’t motivating. You may not even know you’ve achieved it!

**How to Set Clear Goals**

**Personal Goal Setting**

- Write your goal down and be as detailed as possible. Use SMART, and consider putting your goal into the form of a [personal mission statement](#) for added clarity.
- Think about how you’ll measure your success toward this goal. What specific metrics will you use?
- Once you’ve set your goal, examine how it makes you feel. Are you excited? Does the challenge motivate you? If you don’t feel strongly about the goal, you might need to clarify it or change it entirely.

**Team Goal Setting**

- Set clear goals that use specific and measurable standards. For example, “reduce job turnover by 15 percent.”
- Write down the [metrics](#) that you’ll use to measure your team members’ success. Be as specific as possible, and make sure that everyone on your team understands how you’ll measure success.

2. Setting Challenging Goals

People are often motivated by challenging goals, however it’s important not to set a goal that is so challenging it can’t be achieved.

**How to Set Challenging Goals**

**Personal Goal Setting**

- Look at your goal. Is it challenging enough to spark your interest?
- Develop [self-discipline](#), so that you have the persistence to work through problems.
- Identify ways that you can reward yourself when you make progress. Incremental rewards for reaching specific milestones will motivate you to work through challenging tasks.
- Before taking on a major goal, research it thoroughly. This will help you be realistic.

**Team Goal Setting**

- Use the [Inverted-U model](#) to find the best balance between pressure and performance when you set goals.
- Think about how you’ll [reward](#) team members when they achieve challenging goals.
- If possible, create some friendly competition between team members or departments. Competition can encourage people to work harder.

3. Securing Team Commitment

To be effective, your team must understand and agree to the goals – team members are more likely to “buy into” a goal if they have been involved in setting it.

This doesn't mean that you have to negotiate every goal with your team members and secure their approval. They’re likely to commit to it as long as they believe that the goal is achievable, it is consistent with the company’s ambitions, and the person assigning it is credible.

**How to Secure Commitment to Goals**

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Personal Goal Setting

- Stay committed by using visualization techniques to imagine how your life will look once you’ve achieved your goal.
- Create a treasure map to remind yourself why you should work hard. Visual representations of your goal can help you stay committed, even when the going gets tough.

Team Goal Setting

- Allow team members to set their own goals. This will increase their sense of commitment and empowerment.
- Use Management by Objectives to ensure that your team’s goals align with the organization’s goals.
- Use Amabile and Kramer’s Progress Theory to enhance your team’s motivation and commitment with small wins.

4. Gaining Feedback

In addition to selecting the right goals, you should also listen to feedback, so that you can gauge how well you and your team are progressing.

Feedback gives you the opportunity to clarify people’s expectations and adjust the difficulty of their goals.

Keep in mind that feedback doesn’t have to come from other people. You can check how well you’re doing by simply measuring your own progress.

How to Give Feedback on Goals

**Personal Goal Setting**

- Schedule time once a week to analyze your progress and accomplishments. Look at what has and hasn’t worked, and make adjustments along the way.
- Learn how to ask for feedback on your progress from others.
- Use technology to track and measure your progress. Apps like Lift are a good place to start.
- Measure progress by breaking difficult or large goals down into smaller chunks, and seek feedback when you reach each milestone.

**Team Goal Setting**

- Learn how to give your team members feedback that’s objective, useful and positive.
- Create a timetable to schedule regular feedback for your team.
- Use the Stop – Keep Doing – Start model for quick feedback sessions.

5. Considering Task Complexity

Take special care to ensure that work doesn’t become too overwhelming when goals or assignments are highly complex.

People who work in complicated and demanding roles can often push themselves too hard, if they don’t take account of the complexity of the task.

How to Set Complex and Challenging Goals

**Personal Goal Setting**

- Give yourself plenty of time to accomplish complex goals. Set deadlines that apply an appropriate amount of pressure, while still being achievable.
- If you start to feel stressed about meeting your goals, they might be too complex or unrealistic. Reassess both of these areas and modify your goals if necessary.
- Break large, complex goals down into smaller sub-goals. This will stop you feeling overwhelmed, and it will make it easier to stay motivated.

**Team Goal Setting**

- Your team members might need additional training before they work toward their goal. Give everyone a training needs assessment to identify any knowledge or skills gaps.
- If you notice that any team members are overwhelmed, consider putting them into a coaching or mentoring relationship with a more experienced colleague.

Key Points

Goal setting is something that many of us recognize as a vital part of achieving success.
By understanding goal-setting theory, you can apply Locke and Latham’s principles to your goals. Their research confirms the usefulness of SMART goal setting, and their theory continues to influence the way that we measure performance today.

To use this tool, set clear, challenging goals and commit yourself to achieving them. Be sure to provide feedback to others on their performance towards achieving their goals, and reflect on your own progress as well. Also, consider the complexity of the task, and break your goals down into smaller chunks, where appropriate.

If you follow these simple rules, your goal setting will be much more successful, and your overall performance will improve.

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I've found this very useful. I've always read about goals and goal setting and have done just enough. With this information, I can now set the goals I need to achieve and meet them.

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