Goals have a significant influence on worker behavior and performance in organizations and management practice (Locke & Latham, 2002) and are defined as the objective or aim of an action and typically refer to attaining a specific standard of proficiency, often within a specified time limit (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). Setting a goal is one of the most effective ways to increase motivation. Nearly every modern organization has some form of goal setting in operation. Programs such as management by objectives, high-performance work practices, management information systems, benchmarking, stretch targets, as well as systems thinking and strategic planning, include the development of specific goals. Managers widely accept goal setting as a means to improve and sustain performance (DuBrin, 2012).

Based on hundreds of studies, the major finding of goal setting is that individuals who are provided with specific, difficult but attainable goals perform better than those given easy, nonspecific, “your best” goals, or no goals at all. Managers are frequently trained to identify five to seven S.M.A.R.T. goals for each employee and to link rewards directly to goal achievement. The S.M.A.R.T. acronym summarizes many beneficial goal characteristics, standing for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Results-Based, and Time-Sensitive. (Although that acronym is a useful reminder, note that it omits the all-important “Difficult” characteristic). At the same time, however, the individuals must have sufficient ability, accept the goals, and receive feedback related to performance (Latham, 2003).

Organization members perform at higher levels when asked to meet a specific high-performance goal. Asking organization members to improve, to work harder, or to do your best is not helpful, because that kind of goal does not give them a focused target. Specific goals (often quantified) let organization members know what to reach for and allow them to measure their own progress. Research indicates that specific goals help bring about other desirable organizational goals, such as reducing absenteeism, tardiness, and turnover (Locke & Latham, 2002). Assigning specific and difficult goals gives people a number to shoot for—a “measuring stick: that can be used to tell them how hard they need to work and for how long. So if a supervisor said, “Have the assignment on my desk by 10:30 a.m. on Tuesday, with no more than two mistakes,” an employee would have known exactly how hard to work and for how long.

Despite good intentions, however, goals may not always be achieved and then tend to be discarded. For example, individuals who set a goal for losing weight may drop their goal if they find some difficulty in achieving their goal and students who set a goal for getting a “B” in a class, but do poorly on the first exam may abandon their goal. Rather than forsake the motivational effects of goal setting by establishing another single, specific number goal (e.g. lose 10 pounds a month), research by Scott and Nowlis (2013) suggests that to get people reengaged with their goals, they ask then to set a non-specific a with a high-low range that averaged the same (e.g., lose 8-12 pounds a week). Thus, at least under some circumstances non-specific goals may be more effective than specific goals as previous goal setting research has indicated.
References


