UNDERSTANDING GOAL SETTING:
AN IN-CLASS EXPERIMENT

Jiing-Lih Farh
Arthur G. Bedeian
Louisiana State University

A cursory survey of fourteen Organizational Behavior (OB) textbooks on our shelves reveals that each contains a section on goal setting as a motivational theory or technique. This is not surprising given the extensive literature documenting its efficacy in motivating human performance (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). Judging from the texts surveyed, classroom pedagogy relating to goal setting is typically lecture-based, reviewing theoretical and empirical findings. Although this approach may be effective in helping students understand the rationale underlying goal setting, it does not provide them with a first-hand appreciation of its motivational power. The purpose of this note is to describe an alternative pedagogical method for classroom instruction on goal setting. The method involves an in-class experimental task in which student subjects witness the unfolding of key findings relating to goal-setting theory.

Materials for the experimental task were adapted from a creativity test developed by Locke (1966). Operating within three one-minute time frames, the experimental task involves three trials in which subjects list objects or things that can be described by a given adjective (e.g., “thin”). This task is especially suited for classroom use since: (a) accumulated research and teaching have shown that it is highly susceptible to goal influence, (b) it is relatively brief, taking some 30 minutes to complete, (c) it requires virtually no advanced preparation, and (d) students find it both interesting and challenging.

Background

To begin, students should be randomly divided into three goal groups: Hard, Easy, and Nonspecific. Each group should be instructed and run separately to avoid communication between group members prior to performing the experimental task. Experience indicates that a minimum of eight students per group typically produces the expected results. If a class has less than 24 students, a two-group format, with one group being assigned a “hard” and the other an “easy” goal, is recommended. There is no upper limit for the number of students in a group. The following procedure is based on a three-group format.

75
Step 8: When all the groups have completed the experimental task.

Circulate through the classroom.

Step 7: Repeat Steps 5-6 two more times. Then, group and grade each other.

Step 6: After the tasks are complete, collect your group member to give a grade. Thank all.

Conclude, thank, et cetera.

End the trial.

Each trial.

4. The most official part of the experiment. To make sure that group C is the most official, go in front of the group C.

Step 5: Announce the groups' positions, the best group is:

Group A, Group B, Group C.

Step 4: You may do any questions. If you want to ask a question, you may ask a question.

Step 3: If there is no activity group D should be asked.

Step 2: Any word and action is short.

Step 1: This diagram illustrates the process of the experiment.

Diagram 1: Illustrates the process of the experiment.