

# Goal Setting and Achievement

**Robert A. Milligan**  
Cornell University  
Ithaca, NY

*If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there.*

As discussed in the previous proceeding article, management is about performance. It is generally accepted both in management theory and practice that goal setting is an effective and necessary technique for peak performance. In this article, goals are a key ingredient in the achievement of the vision and mission established by the organization leaders.

## Why Goals Improve Performance

The effectiveness of goals in improving performance is explained by a basic theory of human behavior. Many psychologists describe behavior in terms of an "ABC" model. According to this model, behavior (B) is affected by antecedents (A) and consequences (C). An antecedent is an event which prompts or triggers a certain action or behavior. The ringing of a telephone is an antecedent which prompts the action of picking up the phone. Once an action is taken, some consequences result. In the case of the telephone, we find out who is calling.

In the ABC model, goals can be thought of as antecedents. By setting a goal, the manager triggers actions or behavior necessary to achieve the goal. The desire to achieve the goal is often based on the anticipation of positive consequences (expectancy!). For example, a goal of increasing crop yield by 25 percent could trigger such actions as soil testing and machinery repair - behaviors required to achieve the consequence of higher yields.

Starting with this as a basic model, the manner in which goals work can be further studied. Goals work because they (1) focus attention and action, (2) mobilize energy and effort, (3) increase persistence, and (4) encourage development of work strategies. As these four areas are discussed below, it will become clear why the most effective goals are "SMART": Specific, Measurable, Attainable but challenging, Rewarding, and Timed.

## Goal Attributes (SMART)

Goals help managers focus attention on the most important activities. They become an aid in setting

priorities on action to be taken. Specific and Measurable goals direct action more reliably than vague or general goals. For example, a goal of more frequent meetings of the farm management team is too vague; increasing the number of team meetings from one per month to one per week would be a more effective goal.

The level of difficulty is critical to the effectiveness of goals. If goals are sufficiently challenging but still Attainable, energy will be mobilized and better job performance will result. However, unrealistic goals can actually lead to lower commitment. A goal of increasing production per cow per day from 50 to 65 pounds within one year is unrealistic and could cause those involved to become less motivated. On the other hand, if a goal is too modest it can become a performance ceiling inhibiting further improvement.

People enjoy a sense of completion or closure when a goal is accomplished. Often the same people will be uncomfortable when a job is unfinished. It is because of these attitudes that goals increase one's persistence. Of course, this willingness to exert effort over extended periods of time will wane unless the attainment of the goal is rewarding (the R in SMART).

An established goal encourages one to develop the tactics necessary to reach the target. Sometimes these tactics are obvious; however, in many situations, they must be discovered through a problem solving process. Regardless, the goal leads to the essential activity of tactical planning to map out a course of action. This process is expedited by the presence of a target date; thus, the necessity that goals be timed (the T in SMART).

## Goal Achievement

The best results from the use of goals can be obtained by using a four step process; (1) set the goal, (2) obtain commitment to the goal, (3) provide support and feedback to those working on the goal, and (4) evaluate the performance.

### 1. Set the Goal

The issue of who sets the goal is often raised. Field research has demonstrated that it does not matter so

---

*Paper presented at the Fall Conference for Veterinarians, College of Veterinary Medicine, University of Minnesota, October 22, 1992, Dr. James Hanson, Coordinator.*

much how a goal is set; what matters is that a goal was set. Both participative and assigned goal groups in these studies outperformed groups that were simply told to "do your best". Still, there are at least two reasons why managers may want to seek employee involvement in goal setting. The first comes as a surprise to many managers: employees usually set higher goals for themselves than would have been set for them! The second reason is that involvement may contribute to the employee's commitment to reaching the goal.

A second, and critical, issue in setting the goal is the level of difficulty chosen. One of the fundamentals of goal theory is that high goals lead to high performance. This is perhaps the most important lesson of this section. As was mentioned above, goals which are too easy or too hard can lead to lower commitment and poorer performance. Thus, the selection of a challenging but realistic goal level is vitally important.

### 2. *Obtain Goal Commitment*

The goals are unlikely to be achieved unless all personnel accept and remain committed to the goals. Simple instructions and positive support is often all that is needed to gain employee commitment to goals. Employees must also have trust in their manager; they must trust that the goals are fair and reasonable, and have not been set to exploit the employees.

Resistance to assigned goals generally occurs for one of two reasons. First, the employee may feel incapable of reaching the goal because they lack knowledge, ability or skill. Second, the employee may not see any personal benefits, either intrinsic (feelings of accomplishment, pride) or extrinsic (money, promotion, recognition). Training designed to raise the person's confidence that he or she can reach the goal is one method to overcome resistance to goals. Offering rewards (monetary or non-monetary) may also help. Allowing employees to participate in goal setting is another tactic which can be used. Interestingly, research shows participation in goal setting to be most effective with less educated employees.

### 3. *Provide Support and Feedback*

Providing support elements is complementary to a manager's efforts to gain goal commitment, but is also necessary in and of itself. Essential support elements include the following:

- a. resources (money, equipment, time) necessary to do the job and freedom to use those resources;
- b. a business culture which values and shows appreciation for work well done; and
- c. guidance in developing tactical (action) plans for reaching goals.

Feedback is absolutely necessary if goal setting is to work. Remember that human actions or behaviors (B) in the "ABC" model is affected by "A" and "C". If goals are an antecedent (A) to behavior, feedback should be a consequence (C) of behavior. Feedback can take a number of forms, but one of the most effective in improving performance is positive reinforcement. For those implementing a goal achievement program, designing the program to provide some early successes in attaining goals combined with positive feedback to those involved is a great way to get started. However, negative feedback, when warranted, is just as important to the success of a goal setting program. Employees should be made aware if their performance is not meeting expectations and in exactly what way(s) they are falling short. Supervisor support and reaffirmation of goal commitment are especially critical in this situation.

### 4. *Evaluation of Performance*

When the target date for the goal arrives, the goal either will or will not have been achieved. The specific goal level serves primarily as a motivator; the evaluation must focus on analyzing performance in the goal achievement process to provide the information required to set an improved SMART goal that will maximize the contribution to meeting the businesses' mission.

### **Summary**

Goals are certainly an excellent tool for motivating people to achieve peak performance. When the goal achievement process is used properly, the benefits can be great. Focused action, mobilized effort, and increased persistence will all contribute to improved performance. Improved employee performance will, in turn, translate into improved business performance and increased profits.