

Locke E A. Toward a theory of task motivation and incentives.  
*Organ. Behav. Hum. Perform.* 3:157-89, 1968.  
[American Institutes for Research, Washington, DC]

This paper summarizes research on the relationship between goals and task performance. The results indicate that hard goals lead to a higher level of performance than easy goals and that specific, hard goals lead to better performance than 'do your best' goals. It is also argued that money, time limits, feedback, participation, and praise may affect performance through their effects on goal setting. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this paper has been cited over 175 times since 1968.]

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"I was fortunate to work in graduate school (at Cornell University) with T. A. Ryan and Patricia C. Smith, who had argued that the simplest way to look at work motivation was to view it as regulated by 'tasks,' i.e., goals. At that time, the early-1960s, there had been very little research on the effects of different goals on task performance. Therefore, I decided to do my doctoral thesis on this topic. The results were very positive, and I continued this line of research after I got my first job at the American Institutes for Research, supported by a grant from the Office of Naval Research.

"Again the results were very positive. My main problem at that time was getting the research published, since psychology was still dominated by behaviorism which asserted that behavior could be understood without reference to the mind. I recall one editor (of the *Journal of Experimental*

*Psychology*) turning down a goal setting article on the alleged grounds of an inadequate experimental design. I then redesigned the study, did it over, got the same results, and resubmitted it. It was turned down again on the grounds that psychology had given up old-fashioned 'mentalistic' concepts (like 'goal') long ago. I then sent the editor the original rejection letter to show him the contradiction; he angrily evaded the whole issue and that was the last time I sent anything to that journal.

"Other journals, however, were more open to ideas that challenged the status quo. And each published article made it easier to get subsequent ones published. The 1968 article was written after more than a dozen successful goal setting studies had been conducted and published and was based on these studies plus the few others that I could find. The article has been widely cited because it was the first to extensively document the efficacy of the technique of goal setting. The result was an explosion of research on goal setting (summarized most recently by myself, Shaw, Saari, and Latham<sup>1</sup>) which has shown it to be one of the most robust and dependable of motivational phenomena. The basic findings have been replicated numerous times. Goal setting is now an element of Bandura's<sup>2</sup> social learning theory. The relation of goal setting to incentives (such as money and feedback) has been found to be more complex than was originally envisioned, however.

"Perhaps one of the greatest ironies in terms of consequences is that behaviorists, in a last desperate attempt to avoid extinction as a result of the cognitive revolution in psychology, are now using the very technique that they once tried to ban from the journals! They have relabeled it, of course, to try to pretend that they were for it all along. They call it 'organizational behavior modification' but the major technique they use is to assign goals and provide feedback regarding performance in relation to the goals."

1. Locke E A, Shaw K N, Saari L M & Latham G P. Goal setting and task performance: 1969-1980. *Psychol. Bull.* 90:125-52, 1981.
2. Bandura A. *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977. 247 p.