

Goals Gone Wild: The Systematic Side Effects of Over-Prescribing Goal Setting

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Executive Summary:

For decades, goal setting has been promoted as a halcyon pill for improving employee motivation and performance in organizations. Advocates of goal setting argue that for goals to be successful, they should be specific and challenging, and countless studies find that specific, challenging goals motivate performance far better than "do your best" exhortations. The authors of this article, however, argue that it is often these same characteristics of goals that cause them to "go wild." Key concepts include:

- The harmful side effects of goal setting are far more serious and systematic than prior work has acknowledged.
- Goal setting harms organizations in systematic and predictable ways.
- The use of goal setting can degrade employee performance, shift focus away from important but non-specified goals, harm interpersonal relationships, corrode organizational culture, and motivate risky and unethical behaviors.
- In many situations, the damaging effects of goal setting outweigh its benefits.
- Managers should ask specific questions to ascertain whether the harmful effects of goal setting outweigh the potential benefits.

Abstract

Goal setting is one of the most replicated and influential paradigms in the management literature. Hundreds of studies conducted in numerous countries and contexts have consistently demonstrated that setting specific, challenging goals can powerfully drive behavior and boost performance. Advocates of goal setting have had a substantial impact on research, management education, and management practice. In this article, we argue that the beneficial effects of goal setting have been overstated and that systematic harm caused by goal setting has been largely ignored. We identify specific side effects associated with goal setting, including a narrow focus that neglects non-goal areas, a rise in unethical behavior, distorted risk preferences, corrosion of organizational culture, and reduced intrinsic motivation. Rather than dispensing goal setting as a benign, over-the-counter treatment for motivation, managers and scholars need to conceptualize goal setting as a prescription-strength medication that requires careful dosing, consideration of harmful side effects, and close supervision. We offer a warning label to accompany the practice of setting goals.

