

Goal assignment and performance: Assessing the mediating roles of goal commitment and self-efficacy and the moderating role of power distance

Christina Sue-Chan^{a,*} and Mark Ong^{b,1}

^a *Asper School of Business, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Man., Canada R3T 5V4*

^b *University of Western Australia, WA, Australia*

Abstract

This study investigated the effect of goal assignment on the goal commitment, self-efficacy, and performance of individuals who differed on the power distance cultural value dimension. Data were collected from 143 university students in Australia. They were randomly assigned to either a participative or assigned goal setting condition to complete class schedules. Instructional method (i.e., “tell and sell”) and research administrator supportiveness were held constant across the two conditions. Consistent with previous findings, it was hypothesized that self-efficacy and goal commitment would mediate the relation of goal assignment and performance. Extending previous research, it was hypothesized that power distance would moderate the relation of goal assignment and each of goal commitment, self-efficacy, and performance. Hierarchical regression analyses fully supported the mediating and partially supported the moderating hypotheses. Moreover, multigroup structural equation modeling (MSEM) indicated that for low power distance individuals only, self-efficacy mediated the effect of goal assignment on performance.

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1. Introduction

Goal setting is a robust motivational technique that has produced positive effects in 90% of the studies in which goals have been examined (Locke & Latham, 1984, 1990). An assertion of goal theory is that given requisite ability and task familiarity, the more difficult and specific the goal, the higher the performance (Locke & Latham, 1990). Research has established that participation in goal setting affects goal commitment but it remains unclear whether participation has any additional motivational benefits for performance beyond assigned goals (Latham, Erez, &

* Corresponding author. Fax: +204-474-7545.

E-mail address: suechanc@ms.umanitoba.ca (C. Sue-Chan).

¹ Mark Ong is now with 24/7 Media Inc. (Singapore).

Locke, 1988). A second issue within the goal setting paradigm that has received insufficient research attention is the extent to which the findings regarding goal assignment are applicable to individuals from cultures that are characterized by very different cultural values and norms from Anglo-American and northern European cultures, where most of the goal setting research to date has been conducted. Investigation of the second issue is contingent on the first because the primary means by which participation in goal setting is hypothesized to influence performance is through goal commitment (Locke & Latham, 1990). Examination of these two issues in goal theory would address the call by Donovan and Radosevich (1998) and Klein, Wesson, Hollenbeck, and Alge (1999) for additional studies on the role of goal commitment in goal theory.

1.1. Participatively set versus assigned goals

Goal commitment refers to an individual's determination to try for a goal and persistence in pursuing it over time, regardless of its origin (Locke, Latham, & Erez, 1988). Early research examined whether variation in how the goal is set, assigned versus participative, influences goal commitment. This research produced mixed results (Dossett, Latham, & Mitchell, 1979; Erez & Arad, 1986; Erez & Earley, 1987; Erez, Earley, & Hulin, 1985; Latham & Marshall, 1982; Latham & Saari, 1979; Latham & Steele, 1983).

Latham et al. (1988) attempted to resolve the discrepant findings of the effects of assigned versus participatively set goals on goal commitment and performance through a series of laboratory experiments conducted in the United States. They concluded that the discrepancy was due to the methods by which the assigned goals were set. Apparently, Erez and her colleagues used a curt "tell" style to assign goals while Latham and his colleagues used a friendlier "tell and sell" style. Latham et al. (1988) concluded that in the studies of Erez and her colleagues, self-efficacy information (i.e., "this goal is difficult but attainable") was absent from the assigned goal condition whereas efficacy information was present in both the assigned and participative goal assignment conditions in the studies conducted by Latham and his colleagues. Self-efficacy, a belief in one's ability to perform a specific task, is a cognitive motivator that has been empirically demonstrated to positively influence both goal commitment and performance (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Locke & Latham, 1990; Wood & Bandura, 1989a). Meyer and Gellatly (1988) suggested that self-efficacy is affected when goals are set because goals communicate normative information to the performer by suggesting or specifying what level of performance the individual could expect to attain.

The first aim of this study, therefore, was to examine the relations of goal assignment on self-efficacy, goal commitment, and performance when the same "tell and sell" instructions are communicated across the goal assignment conditions. The same level of research administrator supportiveness was also provided in both conditions because evidence suggests that such supportiveness leads to the setting of higher goals, performance, and by inference, goal commitment (Hollenbeck & Klein, 1987; Likert, 1967; Oldham, 1975). Whether cognitive and affective motivational mechanisms, namely self-efficacy and goal commitment, respectively, are mediators of goal assignment on performance was also investigated.

1.2. Power distance

Donovan and Radosevich (1998) speculated that a number of variables, such as disposition and situational variables might influence the goal-performance relationship. Variables that possess both disposition and situational attributes are the enduring personal characteristics of individuals that are derived from national

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