

Two Investigations of the Relationships among Group Goals, Goal Commitment, Cohesion, and Performance

HOWARD J. KLEIN

Department of Management and Human Resources, The Ohio State University

AND

PAUL W. MULVEY

Department of Management, The University of Connecticut

This paper presents two studies exploring the operation of group cohesion and goal processes (difficulty and commitment) on group performance. The results from the first study, using a sample of college students in naturally occurring groups, revealed significant relationships among these variables and suggested that goals are the more immediate determinants of performance, mediating the effects of cohesion on performance. The second study employed a different design and task to address some limitations of the first study and to replicate those findings. The results from the second study were highly consistent with the first. The implications of these findings are discussed. © 1995 Academic Press, Inc.

Much of the work in organizations is accomplished in groups or at least in group settings (Austin & Bobko, 1985). Yet the majority of research on work motivation has not explored motivation in groups or the influences of group processes. Goal setting (Locke & Latham, 1990), which dominates the current study of motivation, exemplifies this situation. Although there have been a number of group goal-setting studies (for a review see Weldon & Weingart, 1993), most of the empirical research on goal setting has been conducted at the individual level. Goal setting in group contexts may not be directly generalizable from research at the

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individual level as goal setting becomes more complicated in groups (Austin & Bobko, 1985; Ilgen, Shapiro, Salas, & Weiss, 1987; Weldon & Weingart, 1993). The goal setting research that has been conducted with groups has not, for the most part, examined these complicating factors. One of the primary factors which differentiates group goal setting from individual goal setting is the presence of group phenomena such as norms, social loafing, or cohesion. Early group research (e.g., Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939) demonstrated the strong influence group processes can have on group performance. It is the purpose of this paper to address this gap in the literature by presenting the results of two separate studies which examine goal setting in group contexts.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL GOAL SETTING

A substantial amount of research has been accumulated regarding the operation of goal processes at the individual level. Specific, difficult goals, if accepted, lead to higher levels of performance than easy goals or no goals (Locke & Latham, 1990). At the group level, these basic relationships have been replicated. A number of studies have shown that higher levels of group performance result when specific, difficult group goals are present than when there are no goals present (e.g., Buller & Bell, 1986; Ivancevich, 1974; Latham & Locke, 1975; Lawrence & Smith, 1955; Pearson, 1987; Weingart & Weldon, 1991; Weldon, Jehn, & Pradhan, 1991) or when easier goals are present (Becker, 1978; Weingart, 1992). This relationship between group goal difficulty and group performance, while not original, should be evident in the current research.

HYPOTHESIS 1. Group goal difficulty will have a positive effect on group performance.

Other studies suggest a curvilinear relationship between group goal difficulty level and group performance (Forward & Zander, 1971; Stedry & Kay, 1964; Zander, Forward, & Albert, 1969; Zander & Newcomb, 1967). These studies reported nonsignificant or even negative relationships between group goals and group performance when goals were too difficult or perceived as impossible. These findings are still consistent with those at the individual level when it is recognized that goals must be accepted if they are to influence behavior. Studies by Ronan, Latham, and Kinne (1973) and Zander *et al.* (1969) provide indirect evidence that acceptance of group goals moderates relationship between group goal difficulty and group performance as is hypothesized at the individual level.

While conceptually goal commitment moderates the relationship between goal level and performance (Hollenbeck & Klein, 1987; Locke & Latham, 1990), this relationship is often not observed, particularly when the range of goals is restricted. For example, when the same, difficult performance goal is assigned to all groups, the groups that are strongly committed to that goal will perform better than less committed groups. This observation of a main effect for commitment on performance is a methodological artifact resulting from the examination of only difficult goals. That is, goal level and goal commitment still jointly influence performance but this interaction would not be expected, and should not be evident, when the range of goals being studied is restricted. The focus of the current studies is restricted to difficult goals because, as noted by Hollenbeck and Klein (1987), there is little reason to advocate the setting of moderate or easy goals.

HYPOTHESIS 2. Group commitment to difficult goals will have a positive effect on group performance.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL GOAL SETTING

Previous research has replicated the positive impact group goals can have on group performance, and other studies have compared the relative effectiveness of group and individual goals in group contexts (e.g., Goben, 1986; Matsui, Kakuyama, & Onglatco, 1987; Mitchell & Silver, 1990). Few studies, however, have examined the important differences introduced at the group level. The influence of these additional forces on goal processes and on the relationships between goal processes and performance needs to be examined in order to understand and predict how goals can motivate groups. At the individual level, while the goal difficulty effect is one of the most robust in the organizational behavior literature (Mento *et al.*, 1987),

boundary conditions (e.g., task complexity) have been identified which limit the effectiveness of goals (Locke & Latham, 1990). At the group level, several additional considerations, gleaned from the group literature, need to be examined. Existing models of group effectiveness (e.g., Gladstein, 1984; Hackman & Morris, 1975; Shiflett, 1979; Steiner, 1972) suggest numerous factors which may complicate group goal setting. Interestingly, none of these models emphasize group goals. Neither Steiner (1972), Hackman, and Morris (1975) nor Shiflett (1979) explicitly include goals in their models and Gladstein (1984), while including a reference to goals, focuses only on goal clarity.

Among the many variables included in models of group effectiveness, an established concept in the group literature is cohesion. A cohesive group is one in which members are attracted to one another and desire to remain a part of the group (Cartwright, 1968). Cohesive groups are further characterized by a high degree of commitment to the group task (Goodman, Ravlin, & Schminke, 1987). The relationship between cohesion and group performance is complex and is assumed more often than examined (Goodman *et al.*, 1987). Stogdill's (1972) review of this relationship reveals substantial inconsistency which suggests that the effects of cohesion on group performance are indirect, operating through other variables. Shaw (1981) concludes that "the effects of cohesiveness upon the performance of the group is undoubtedly mediated by motivational factors" (p. 225). Consideration of group goals and goal commitment provides a possible motivational explanation for the divergent findings in the literature regarding cohesion and group performance.

Given that cohesive groups have a high degree of commitment to the group task, they should also have a high degree of commitment to achieving the goals of the group (Berkowitz, 1954; Shaw, 1981). That is, cohesive groups should be more committed to the aims and actions of the group than noncohesive groups. Two studies, conducted at individual level of analysis, provide indirect evidence for this position. Schachter, Ellertson, McBride, and Gregory (1951) and Berkowitz (1954) both found that members of cohesive groups more readily accepted attempts by confederates within the group to influence them to increase or decrease their production than members of less cohesive groups. While neither Schachter *et al.* (1951) nor Berkowitz (1954), actually measured acceptance or employed the group as the level of analysis, these studies and the preceding discussion suggest that cohesive groups should be more committed to group goals than noncohesive groups.

HYPOTHESIS 3. Cohesion will be positively related to group goal commitment.

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