



Goal setting in teams: The impact of learning and performance goals on process and performance

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 March 2011

Accepted 17 March 2013

Accepted by Richard Moreland

Keywords:

Goal-setting

Team processes

Team performance

ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of three alternative types of goals (specific learning, general “do your best” learning, and specific performance) on team performance. Eighty-four-person teams engaged in an interdependent command and control simulation in which the team goal and task complexity were manipulated. Contrary to research at the individual level, teams with specific learning goals performed worse than did teams with general “do your best” learning goals or specific performance goals. The negative effects of specific learning goals relative to general “do your best” learning goals and specific performance goals were amplified under conditions of increased task complexity and were explained by the amount of coordination in the teams.

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Introduction

One of the most established theories of motivation is that of goal setting (Latham, 2007; Latham & Locke, 2007; Mitchell & Daniels, 2003), which demonstrates that goals can significantly influence individual and team performance (Kleingeld, van Mierlo, & Arends, 2011; Locke & Latham, 1990; O’Leary-Kelly, Martocchio, & Frink, 1994). Prior research suggests that the effects of goal setting are similar at the individual and team levels of analysis (e.g., Chen, Kanfer, DeShon, Mathieu, & Kozlowski, 2009; O’Leary-Kelly et al., 1994). Yet, the interconnectedness among team members and the collective nature of team tasks may in fact make the motivational processes associated with goal setting different at the team level than at the individual level (Chen & Kanfer, 2006; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003; Latham & Locke, 2007).

One burgeoning area of research in goal setting at the individual level is the distinction between learning and performance goals (e.g., Cianci, Klein, & Seijts, 2010; Kozlowski & Bell, 2006; Seijts, Latham, Tasa, & Latham, 2004). In response to findings that specific, difficult goals harm learning and skill acquisition, individual-level research suggests that learning goals, rather than performance goals, should be set when tasks are complex or a person lacks

the knowledge to perform the task effectively (Seijts et al., 2004). Recent research suggests that individual-level learning goals should be specific and difficult, much like performance goals (Seijts & Latham, 2005; Seijts et al., 2004). Although research has demonstrated the positive effect of specific, difficult performance goals on team functioning (Kleingeld et al., 2011; O’Leary-Kelly et al., 1994), few studies have examined learning goals in teams (Brown & Latham, 2002).

We theorize that the effects of specific learning goals observed at the individual level will not generalize to the team level for two reasons. First, we submit that learning and performance goals cue different motivations and behavioral responses. Thus far, research on team goal setting has primarily focused on the extent to which performance goals cue responses such as increased effort, planning, and strategy formulation (Weingart, 1992; Weingart & Weldon, 1991; Weldon, Jehn, & Pradhan, 1991). Research has yet to investigate the responses cued by learning goals. Second, we expect goal specificity and task complexity to influence how learning goals cue those responses. We theorize that the combination of a learning focus and high specificity will cue team members to adopt a more narrow focus on learning specific aspects of the task and therefore impair team coordination. We also expect task complexity to be an important boundary condition of the goal-performance relationship in teams.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the extent to which findings regarding specific learning goals at the individual level

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(Seijts et al., 2004) generalize to the team level, and to understand the mechanism through which goal type (learning, performance) and specificity influence team performance. We propose that specific learning goals are less effective in team contexts than general “do your best” learning goals and specific performance goals, and that these differential effects operate through the process of team coordination. Finally, we expect these differential effects to be further amplified on complex tasks, resulting in a first-stage mediated moderation model (Edwards & Lambert, 2007).

Theory and hypotheses

Learning and performance goals in teams: the role of team coordination

Group goals have two important dimensions. The first dimension, goal content, focuses team members on the results being sought (Latham, 2007; Locke & Latham, 1990). Attention can be shifted to different results based on whether the goal has a learning or a performance focus, and this shift in focus cues different motivations and behavioral responses from team members (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005; Dweck, 1986; Kozlowski & Bell, 2006; Seijts et al., 2004). The second dimension, goal specificity, reduces the interpretive leeway of the exact meaning of the goal (Locke & Latham, 1990), and thus can also alter behavioral responses.

We posit that the content and specificity of team goals will cue different responses, with a particular focus on how teams coordinate their efforts. Team coordination refers to the management of synchronous activities that align the pace and sequencing of team member’s contributions towards goal accomplishment. Team coordination is closely intertwined with the task work of the team, includes both communication and support behaviors within the team, and is more heavily relied on for effective functioning when the interdependence among team members increases (Marks, Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001; Wittenbaum, Vaughan, & Stasser, 1998).

Specific learning goals versus general “do your best” learning goals

When goal content is learning, attention is focused on knowledge or skill acquisition (Seijts & Latham, 2005). Learning goals focus attention on mastering a task, discovering task-relevant strategies, and achieving learning objectives (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005; Locke & Latham, 2002; Seijts & Latham, 2005; Seijts et al., 2004). Attention is explicitly directed to learning the task, and this learning focus initiates a search process to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to master the task. Team contexts, relative to individual contexts, create an opportunity for team members to distribute their attention, search for information, and pool their collective knowledge via information exchange (Latham & Locke, 2007). This collective search and information exchange process lies at the core of effective team learning (Edmondson, 1999; Ellis et al., 2003; Gibson & Vermeulen, 2003). Teams can also build transactive memories in which team members not only build their own knowledge, but also build knowledge about which team members possess other knowledge (e.g., Moreland, 1999) which leads to stronger team processes and performance (DeChurch & Mesmer-Magnus, 2010).

Exchanging information and supporting other team members are core aspects of team coordination and a key feature of teams (Marks et al., 2001). We expect teams with learning goals to engage in more team coordination to achieve learning objectives and discover task-relevant strategies. This increase in team coordination allows team members to master the task, thereby improving team performance. Although a learning goal may focus the attention on learning and cue the need for team coordination,

the specificity of the learning goal will be important in determining the level of team coordination. We hypothesize that a specific learning goal, rather than a general learning goal, will lead to lower team coordination and thus, lower team performance. There are two reasons for this hypothesis.

First, a specific learning goal narrows the focus of attention for all team members to learning individual aspects of the task (Rothkopf & Billington, 1979). Thus, each team member focuses on learning the same set of specific objectives. Team members will also increase their focus on the specific learning objectives in order to reduce the apprehension and distraction which occurs from the mere presence of other team members (Geen, 1989, 1991). Focusing on the narrow set of specific learning objectives makes it likely that there will be less information sharing in the team. Team members will only search for and share insights pertaining to those objectives, and are thus less likely to search for or share additional learning insights that are not specified in the learning goal. Prior research has shown that individuals with specific learning goals learn less about off-task material (Rothkopf & Billington, 1979). Likewise, focusing on a specific set of learning objectives directs attention away from supporting other team members in mastering the task.

Second, specific learning goals increase team members’ perception of time pressure. Prior research shows that individuals given specific goals perceive greater time pressure than do individuals who receive “do your best” goals (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989). High specificity in team learning goals may also lead to perceptions of increased time pressure. In team contexts, versus individual contexts, these perceptions of time pressure can lead team members to focus on a restricted range of task-relevant cues (Karau & Kelly, 1992; Kelly & Karau, 1999) and limit the degree of information exchange among team members, something that is essential for effective team coordination (Kelly & Loving, 2004). Likewise, due to perceptions of increased time pressure, attention will be directed to specific learning objectives and away from supporting other team members in mastering the task.

Hypothesis 1. Teams with specific learning goals will have lower team performance relative to teams with general “do your best” learning goals.

Hypothesis 2. The negative effect of specific learning goals on team performance relative to general “do your best” learning goals will be mediated by lower team coordination.

Specific learning goals versus specific performance goals

When goal content is performance, attention is focused on demonstrating skill through achieving certain outcomes (DeShon & Gillespie, 2005; Seijts & Latham, 2005). Performance goals aim at attaining a standard of task proficiency or achieving a task outcome (Seijts et al., 2004). With performance goals, there is less emphasis on searching for information, because the knowledge and skills needed to achieve the performance goal are generally considered a given. Rather than initiating a search for the knowledge and skills needed to perform the task, performance goals cue behaviors that allow individuals to demonstrate their skills and achieve the desired performance level (Latham & Locke, 2007). Similar to specific learning goals, we also expect that specific performance goals will narrow team members’ attention to achieving specific standards of team performance. We hypothesize that teams with specific learning goals, relative to teams with specific performance goals, will engage in less team coordination, and

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