



RESEARCH IN ACTION

Goal Orientation:

Why Wanting to Look Successful Doesn't Always Lead to Success

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Do you agree with the following statements?

- Competition and pressure bring out the best performance from employees.
- You have a certain amount of intelligence, and you really can't do much to change it.
- Leaders are born, not developed.
- The top performers are those employees who are hungry to prove their ability to others.

The purpose of the current report is to present the concept of goal orientation and to discuss why recent goal orientation research indicates that the above beliefs can often be *counterproductive* for cultivating the use of self-management procedures, fostering skill development, and enhancing employee performance. This report further discusses the potential ramifications of goal orientation for employment decisions, training programs, appraisal systems, group dynamics, and organization culture.

THE CONCEPT OF GOAL ORIENTATION

The concept of goal orientation emerged in the 1980s from research conducted with grade school children by Carol Dweck and her colleagues. In this research, children worked on a set of problem-solving tasks that they were able to successfully solve, and then were given a second set of problems that were very difficult for their age level. As the children encountered failure on the more difficult problems, the researchers observed two distinct response patterns. A portion of the children exhibited a helpless (maladaptive) response pattern. These children quickly became demoralized and expressed little interest in continuing with the activity, a loss of confidence in their ability, and feelings of distress and unhappiness. Their problem-solving strategies became more random,

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and even counterproductive. In marked contrast, other children exhibited a more constructive (adaptive) response pattern. These children appeared to enjoy the challenge, remained confident that they could eventually solve the problems, and worked at developing more productive problem-solving strategies.

Why did these two groups of children, who had similar levels of success and motivation on the first set of problems, exhibit such different response patterns when they encountered the more difficult problems? Conducting additional investigation, Dweck found that children approached situations with different goals. The maladaptive response pattern corresponded with children focusing on a goal of performing well to obtain favorable judgments about their ability from others. Failure on an activity undermined their goal of wanting to look good to others and set into motion the maladaptive response pattern. The adaptive response pattern corresponded with children focusing on a goal of learning something new to develop their ability. These children viewed the errors and obstacles they encountered as a natural part of the learning process.

In summary, Dweck found that children tended to approach activities with two underlying goals—developing ability and demonstrating ability. When facing a challenge, the pursuit of these goals had a profound impact on behavior and performance. Building on this insight, Dweck proposed the concept of goal orientation, and identified two basic orientations:

- **Learning goal orientation:** A preference to *develop* one's competence by acquiring new skills and mastering new situations.
- **Performance goal orientation:** A preference to *demonstrate* and validate one's competence by seeking favorable judgments and avoiding negative judgments from others.

In the 1990s, goal orientation attracted the attention of psychology and management scholars who were conducting research with adults. Prominent centers of goal-orientation research with adults include Southern Methodist University, the University of



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Rochester, and Michigan State University. These researchers have investigated two important questions: (1) Do adults also have learning and performance goal orientations that operate in settings such as work, training, and higher education? (2) If they do have such orientations, what processes explain why learning and performance goal orientations differentially impact behavior and performance?

The significant body of research conducted to address these questions has produced striking and far-reaching answers to both questions. First, adults also hold learning and performance goal orientations. Second, studies conducted in both laboratory and field settings have identified the processes that explain how goal orientation influences behavior and performance. Prominent among the processes are cognitive framing, the use of self-management procedures, and the pursuit of skill-development opportunities.

Before presenting the research findings, several characteristics of goal orientation are important to note. First, although goal orientation is an identifiable personality trait, research indicates that goal orientation can also be influenced by situational factors. In a given situation, strong cues that highlight the value of learning or performance goals can override an individual's characteristic goal orientation. I discuss the nature of and importance of situational cues in the management application section of the report. Second, learning and performance goal orientations are not mutually exclusive traits, nor is a performance goal orientation completely undesirable. Rather, research indicates that individuals can hold various combinations of high and low levels of each goal orientation. However, an overemphasis on a performance goal orientation can become dysfunctional when it dominates a learning goal orientation and leads individuals to avoid or abandon challenging situations that could provide valuable learning opportunities. Third, a performance goal orientation is composed of two concerns about ability—*proving* ability to gain positive judgments

and *avoiding* negative judgments about ability. Although most research has studied the proving concern, more recent research has also examined the avoiding concern. This latter concern has an especially deleterious impact on behavior and performance.

COGNITIVE FRAMING

Central to understanding how goal orientation influences behavior and performance are studies finding that learning and performance goal orientations are each associated with different cognitive frameworks for how situations are interpreted. Especially prominent dimensions of these two frameworks are beliefs about ability and effort, the meaning of feedback, and self-efficacy.

Learning and performance goal orientations are associated with different *implicit* theories about personal abilities, such as intelligence and interpersonal skills. A learning goal orientation is associated with an *incremental* implicit theory—ability is viewed as a malleable attribute that can be developed with effort and persistence. In contrast, a performance goal orientation is associated with an *entity* implicit theory—ability is viewed as a fixed, innate attribute that is difficult to develop.

Learning and performance goal orientations are also associated with different beliefs about the value of effort and the causes of success. With a learning goal orientation, there is a belief that effort is an important determinant of success. Effort is viewed as a means for activating one's current ability and as a strategy for developing the additional capabilities needed for future task mastery. With a performance goal orientation, however, exerting substantial effort is often viewed as ineffective, because ability is perceived as an innate attribute that is difficult to change. Exerting significant effort can even be viewed as detrimental, because one needs to work hard to compensate for a lack of natural talent. And, if one does take the risk of working hard and fails, there is a devastating "confirmation" of low ability. To

illustrate this belief about effort, an employee might discount the value of active participation in a leadership-training program because deep down, he or she believes that one has to be a “natural” to be a successful leader.

Goal orientation also influences the interpretation of feedback. When approaching a task with a strong learning goal orientation, individuals tend to view feedback as useful diagnostic information about progress made, errors to be corrected, and the need for alternative strategies. With a strong performance goal orientation, however, feedback is viewed as an evaluation of one’s personal worth and a judgment of one’s competency level. Negative feedback can be especially devastating when individuals hold a strong performance goal orientation, because such feedback conflicts with their goal of appearing competent.

Self-efficacy refers to the belief that one has the capacity to organize and execute the course of action required to produce a desired outcome. Individuals engage in greater effort and persist longer when they believe that success is possible. Studies have shown that a learning goal orientation has a positive relationship, and that a performance goal orientation has a negative relationship, with self-efficacy. A strong learning goal orientation can also help individuals maintain their self-efficacy in the face of setbacks. By believing that ability can be developed, these individuals are receptive to finding ways to develop the skills needed to overcome the setback. In addition, a learning goal orientation has positive relationships with optimism and hope—two personality traits that foster resiliency to setbacks.

GOAL ORIENTATION AND SELF-REGULATION

Self-regulation is the process by which individuals influence their thoughts and behaviors to obtain desired levels of performance. Self-regulation processes include goal set-

ting, strategic planning, and directing effort. Research by scholars such as Edwin Locke and Gary Latham provides extensive evidence for using self-regulation procedures to improve work-related performance. Goal orientation is now emerging as an important personality predictor of self-regulation choices. Specifically, studies are finding that a learning goal orientation, compared with a performance goal orientation, often leads to individuals engaging in a more productive pattern of self-regulation procedures for enhancing work-related performance.

Goal Level

A prime example of learning and performance goal orientations leading to differential self-regulation patterns has been found in goal-setting research. Individuals with a strong learning goal orientation are interested in developing their skill and ability, believe that such development is possible, and approach situations with a sense of high self-efficacy. These beliefs are conducive to a willingness to stretch oneself by setting challenging goals and seeking opportunities that foster personal growth. In contrast, individuals with a strong performance goal orientation may avoid setting a challenging goal because of their concern about looking bad if they fail to achieve the goal. In addition, individuals with a strong performance goal orientation approach a situation without the benefit of hope and optimism, so challenging goals are less likely to appear realistic.

Consistent with this reasoning are the findings from a study conducted with my colleagues. We studied the sales performance of the members of the sales staff of a medical supply distributor who were participating in a 90-day promotional campaign for a specific piece of medical equipment. At the announcement of the promotional campaign, we assessed the goal orientations of the salespeople and also asked each salesperson to set a target goal for the number of product units to be sold during the campaign. We found that a learning goal orien-

tation had a strong positive relationship with the goal level for the number of products to be sold, which in turn, had a positive relationship with the number of units sold. Salespeople who had a high learning goal orientation score sold nearly twice as many units as salespeople with a low learning goal orientation score. The lowest sales volume came from salespeople in the low learning goal orientation-high performance goal orientation combination.

Goal Type

In another study, we investigated the type of personal goals that M.B.A. students set for an intensive business presentation skills seminar that was required for graduation. We found that goal orientation influenced the type of personal goals that the students set for the seminar. A learning goal orientation led to setting skill improvement goals (goals to develop new presentation skills and to refine existing presentation skills). In turn, these skill improvement goals were positively related to their performance on the final seminar presentation. In contrast, a performance goal orientation was related to setting positive comparison goals (a goal to present better than other seminar participants) and avoidance goals (a goal to not look bad or incompetent at presentations). Neither of these latter two personal seminars goals, however, had positive relationships with the performance level for the final seminar presentation.

Planning

For complex and challenging tasks, development of a strategic plan is critical to achieve successful results. Studies indicate that a learning goal orientation is more conducive than a performance goal orientation for engaging in planning. For example, in the study with the salespeople in the 90-day product promotion campaign, we found that a learning goal orientation had a much stronger relationship than did a performance goal orientation to planning for both one's sales

territory and for specific customer accounts. Additional research with salespeople has found that a learning goal orientation enhances not only the likelihood of developing a plan, but also the willingness to adjust the plan to meet emergent situational demands.

Effort

Studies with employees in work settings, college students in academic courses, and participants working on tasks in laboratory studies have all found that a learning goal orientation has a positive influence on the level of effort exerted. This positive relationship is expected because a learning goal orientation is consistent with the belief that effort is a means for success and for approaching tasks with a sense of self-efficacy. With a strong learning goal orientation, the tendency to set goals and develop a plan to accomplish the goals provides an additional impetus to exert effort.

The relationship of a performance goal orientation with effort depends on the nature of the task and one's skill level. Several studies have found that for simple tasks, such as a straightforward decision-making activity, a performance goal orientation can sometimes be advantageous. Because such tasks are already understood and successful performance is likely, learning is not required and anxiety distractions about poor performance are not likely. However, for complex, challenging tasks, especially when one has setbacks and doubts about ability, the influence of a performance goal orientation for exerting effort is neutral at best.

TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Another important body of research has investigated the implications of goal orientation for training and development opportunities. This research has studied how goal orientation influences the motivation to pursue training opportunities, the benefits derived from training, reactions to feedback, and the willingness to seek feedback.

Training

Research has found that individuals with a strong learning goal orientation, compared with those who have a strong performance goal orientation, indicate greater motivation to participate in training programs for a variety of content areas (e.g., computer software, communication skills, leadership skills). In contrast, a strong performance goal orientation does not enhance motivation to participate in training programs. This response is predictable because these individuals are skeptical that their ability can be developed. They may also be concerned that a “poor performer stigma” could be attached to them for seeking out such opportunities.

Studies have also shown that once an individual is enrolled in a training program, a learning goal orientation, as opposed to a performance goal orientation, enhances the benefits gained from the program. Three processes explain why a learning goal orientation augments the benefits gained from training programs. First, when trainees approach training with a learning goal orientation, they are more likely to stay “on task” and less likely to be distracted by intrusive thoughts (e.g., How poorly am I doing? What does the trainer think of me?). Second, a learning goal orientation promotes the use of metacognition—the process of taking an active role in learning by assessing one’s level of understanding and adjusting one’s learning strategies as needed. Third, after completion of a training program, a learning goal orientation fosters self-efficacy (the belief that one can utilize the new skills successfully) and enhances the likelihood of engaging in skill-maintenance activities.

Feedback

Performance feedback is a very attractive development technique for enhancing work productivity because of the technique’s simplicity, cost-effectiveness, and flexibility. Feedback, if accurate and sufficiently detailed, can provide information about progress, helps employees develop the skills

needed for task performance, and informs them about the behavior and strategy changes needed to improve performance.

Research has found that for corrective feedback, goal orientation impacts the effectiveness of the feedback intervention. Employees with a strong learning goal orientation perceive feedback as diagnostic information that can be used to improve their performance. With this diagnostic interpretation, feedback stimulates a proactive response to develop and consider alternative strategies to improve performance. In contrast, employees with a strong performance goal orientation tend to perceive feedback as a judgment about their worth. With this judgmental framing, improvement efforts are sidetracked by emotional responses, rumination, and defensive rationalization activities.

Research has also found that individuals with a strong learning goal orientation are more willing to seek feedback because they focus on the feedback’s diagnostic value for improving their performance. Individuals with a strong performance goal orientation are more likely to pass up seeking feedback because they focus more on the costs of exposing deficiencies.

SYNERGISTIC EFFECTS

The comparative advantage of a learning goal orientation for enhancing performance can be especially pronounced when self-regulation and development processes are used together. To illustrate, consider an employee with a strong learning goal orientation who seeks and receives a challenging assignment. The employee is likely to set challenging goals, and when also needed, set developmental goals. To achieve these goals, the employee develops a strategic plan and is willing to exert the effort required to execute the plan. The employee may consider participation in a training program to acquire the skills and knowledge required for the assignment. Finally, the employee is likely to persist in the face of difficulty and setbacks, and

seek feedback when needed on how to overcome roadblocks, improve performance, and so forth

For an employee with a strong performance goal orientation, the predicted activity pattern is quite different. First, the employee may be hesitant to even seek or accept a challenging assignment, especially if there is a risk of failure. If the assignment were accepted, the employee would likely set a goal level low enough to ensure success. The goal focus would be on proving ability his or her ability to others and avoiding failure. Anxiety about potential failure would distract the employee from spending time on developing a strategy or devoting full effort to the assignment. Because individuals with a strong performance goal orientation are skeptical about their potential to develop managerial competencies, training programs may be bypassed. Seeking feedback about how to improve performance would be avoided for fear that such requests might be interpreted as a lack of self-confidence or a sign of inadequate ability to handle the job. The irony of holding a strong performance goal orientation is that the desire to “look successful” prevents one from engaging in the very activities that could help one actually “become successful” at an assignment, job, and so forth

PUTTING GOAL ORIENTATION TO WORK

After nearly a decade of research, there is a growing accumulation of evidence that a learning goal orientation has a positive impact on work-related behaviors and performance. However, understanding an individual’s goal orientation is by no means a panacea for making personnel decisions. For example, for a position with high employee turnover, an organization may decide to reduce the need for on-the-job skill development through simplifying the job, close supervision, automation, and detailed rules and regulations. An individual with a strong learning goal orientation

would not be a good candidate for such a constrained work situation.

The value of using a learning goal orientation for personnel decisions increases as positions are characterized by the following requirements:

- A proactive, problem-solving response to setbacks.
- Creativity and openness to new ideas.
- Skill development for evolving task demands.
- Adaptation to new environments.
- Effective processing of feedback for performance improvement.

Based on these characteristics, several examples illustrate work situations where a learning goal orientation can be an especially valuable screening criterion.

Executive Identification

Studies investigating early identification of executive talent have found that high potential managers take a proactive approach to learning. Specifically, high potential managers (compared with managers who have average advancement potential) are more likely to pursue learning opportunities and to seek feedback.

Expatriate Managers

A learning goal orientation is an important selection criterion for international assignments because of the exigencies facing the expatriate. An expatriate assignment places the manager in a novel situation as to the social, legal, and market traditions of the host country. A strong learning goal orientation can enhance the likelihood that managers will persist in learning how to meet the challenges of working outside the comfort zone of their home culture and existing expertise.

Team Membership

A strong learning goal orientation enhances the likelihood that an individual is open to new experiences, value cooperation, and effectively process feedback. Given these char-

acteristics, a learning goal orientation can be a valuable screening criterion for team membership when the team works on complex projects that require creativity and synergistic interactions to produce optimal solutions.

ASSESSING GOAL ORIENTATION

Managers can use goal orientation to inform decisions about personnel selection, team membership composition, and candidate selection for training programs. Instruments have been developed and validated for direct assessment of goal orientation (see the Appendix to determine your goal orientation). In addition, the following indirect methods can be used to assess goal orientation.

Several behaviors provide insightful cues to assess an individual's goal orientation. In particular, what track record does the individual have for pursuing growth opportunities through participation in professional development programs, initiating new projects, and effectively seeking and processing diagnostic feedback? Probing further, how does the individual explain his or her reasons for pursuing (or not pursuing) such opportunities?

Belief systems about ability and effort provide another indirect means to assess goal orientation. Employees are more likely to approach a situation with a learning goal orientation when they believe that the skills required for success are developable capabilities. An employee's belief system also provides an important intervention opportunity to influence the goal orientation of a current employee. Managers can help employees change their implicit theory of ability from a fixed to an incremental belief through these procedures: (1) Explain how a given capability can be developed; (2) Provide role model examples of comparable individuals who have developed the capability; (3) Provide training opportunities to develop the capability; (4) Provide feedback and encouragement on progress.

MANAGING GOAL ORIENTATION

The culture of an organization can encourage or discourage the dispositional goal orientation that an employee brings to the workplace. The following practices can enhance the likelihood that employees will approach their work with a learning goal orientation.

Performance Management

Reward and performance appraisal systems direct attention to what is considered important by management. Employees are likely to forgo learning opportunities when performance management procedures emphasize short-term results, identify winners and losers, and encourage competition among colleagues. In contrast, a learning goal orientation is fostered when performance management is designed to balance the focus on short-term and long-term results, identifies potential for improvement, and encourages cooperation among colleagues.

Leadership

Leaders must model and support behaviors consistent with a learning goal orientation. Behaviors include having employees set development objectives, encouraging them to pursue developmental opportunities, and providing diagnostic feedback for improving their performance. Managers can bring a focus on learning to center stage by asking questions such as, "What have you learned since our last meeting that can help our organization become more successful?"

Stretch Assignments

Stretch assignments provide an important opportunity for learning, but employees will operate within the safe confines of the status quo when only "successful risk taking" is tolerated. Organizations need to frame these assignments as opportunities for innovation and growth, be willing to acknowledge failure when it occurs, develop procedures to learn from failure, and develop systems to

protect risk taking. Acceptance of failure should not be treated as a *carte blanche* entitlement. Rather, there should be a low tolerance for failure based on inaction or recycling of mistakes. These latter sources of failure are inconsistent with the philosophy of a learning goal orientation and are detrimental to organizational productivity.

CONCLUSION

The introduction to this report asked you to reflect on some fundamental beliefs about human capabilities and employee performance. A decade of research has shown that individuals may not fulfill their potential when they doubt whether personal capabilities can be developed and when they are preoccupied with performance outcomes for the sake of competency validation. Clearly, employees need to be concerned about performance, but an *excessive* focus on performance can short-circuit the use of the very self-management and developmental activi-

ties needed for high-level performance. In contrast, a strong learning goal orientation enhances performance because it promotes the use of self-regulation activities to achieve mastery for a current task endeavor and also fosters development of valuable skills for future challenging tasks.

In the new century, organizations face a rapidly changing and highly competitive economic environment. Organizational learning is a critical capacity for sustaining competitive advantage in this environment. Organizational learning, however, is rooted in individual learning. Given this need for individuals to pursue learning, goal orientation is a critical concept for organizations to understand for personal decisions and for managing the culture of an organization.



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APPENDIX 1

Instructions: Individuals have different views about how they approach *work*. Please read each statement below and select the response that reflects how much you agree or disagree with the statement.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly disagree	<i>Disagree</i>	Sort of disagree	Neither	Sort of agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1.	I am willing to select a challenging work assignment that I can learn a lot from.					
2.	I often look for opportunities to develop new skills and knowledge.					
3.	I enjoy challenging and difficult tasks at work where I'll learn new skills.					
4.	For me, further development of my work ability is important enough to take risks.					
5.	I like to show that I can perform better than my co-workers.					
6.	I try to figure out what it takes to prove my ability to others at work.					
7.	I enjoy it when others at work are aware of how well I am doing.					
8.	I prefer to work on projects where I can prove my ability to others.					
9.	I would avoid taking on a new task if there was a chance that I would appear rather incompetent to others.					
10.	Avoiding a show of low ability is more important to me than learning a new skill.					
11.	I'm concerned about taking on a task at work if my performance would reveal that I had low ability.					
12.	I prefer to avoid situations at work where I might perform poorly.					

To calculate your goal orientation profile, sum and average your responses to question 1 through 4 for the learning goal orientation, questions 5 through 8 for the proving dimension of a performance goal orientation, and questions 9 through 12 for the avoiding dimension of a performance goal orientation.

Adapted from VandeWalle (1997).



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