Diagnosing and Modifying Personal Goals: a training programme on goal setting

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Introduction

A training programme on goal setting was piloted among 3 groups, including postgraduate and mature students in the Human Resource Management field. This paper sets out the aims, rationale and design of the programme, plus a brief evaluation of the pilot.

Rationale and aim of the training course on goal setting

The capacity to display high motivation and attain goals in the face of obstacles has become a key capability especially for employees. Research around the area of goal setting has shown that there are distinct characteristics of people's goals that are decisive to achieving them. Furthermore people are rarely aware of these characteristics. This makes it even more important to integrate some of the major findings on goal setting into a common training approach to help people set their goals in a smarter way and therefore enhance the likelihood of attaining them. This is the rationale for developing the training course outlined here. It provides several diagnostic tools to help people self-assess which crucial aspects of their goals they might need to modify to ensure goal attainment.

The foundation of the course is Locke and Latham's (1990) goal setting theory, but it additionally draws on specific goal setting topics such as:

• Dealing with multiple conflicting goals (King & Emmons, 1988; Kehr, 2004);
• Setting oneself learning goals rather than performance goals and goals oriented towards a positive outcome ('approaching' goals) rather than 'avoiding' goals i.e. towards avoiding negative outcomes (cf. Latham, 2007);
• Alignment of goals with the implicit motive structure of individuals, so that the process of goal attainment is more enjoyable (Kehr, 2004; Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2008).

This training course focuses specifically on people's personal goals which Brunstein, Schultheiss and Grässmann (1998, p. 495) define as '... individualised and cognitively elaborated representations of what a person wants to achieve in his or her current life situation'. This definition makes it clear that the training is not dealing with long term goals or even life goals (having made a successful career when 65 or owning a yacht in 15 years), but rather goals that influence people's behaviour at the moment. At the outset the participants generate between 4-6 goals from various categories such as: job, study, private life, personality development, social life, health etc. These personal goals can now be analysed in terms of those crucial characteristics which make a difference in people's goal attainment.

Measurement of multiple goal conflicts

Although research has been mainly concerned with the repercussions of single goals on behaviour (Kehr, 2004), individuals generally have multiple personal goals (Riedieger & Freund, 2004). Furthermore, a key characteristic affecting the attainment of any one goal is its relationship to the other goals. Individual goals may have no interactional effects with each other, may foster each other's attainment or may be in conflict with each other, the latter having a detrimental influence on goal achievement (Kehr, 2004). Substantial research has indicated that goal conflicts lead to high levels of negative affect, depression, neuroticism and psychosomatic complaints. Subjects also were less likely to act towards the achievement of conflicting goals because they spent so much time thinking about them (Emmons & King, 1988; Kehr, 2004).

To assess the extent of goal conflict, the training uses an adapted version of the 'goal conflict matrix' by Emmons (Emmons & King, 1988; Emmons, King & Sheldon, 1993). The participants are asked to name 4-6 of the most important goals in their current life situation (cf. Kehr, 2004) and are then asked to rate the impact that being successful on one goal would have on the others. The answers range from -2 (very harmful) through 0 (independent, no relationship) to +2 (very helpful). This self-administered method allows participants to detect potential conflicts between goals. By then modifying the goals which are in conflict with others they are able to enhance the likelihood of goal attainment. For instance, individuals with conflicts between goals in and outside of their work can be counselled to help them reduce this conflict and its consequent negative emotions, so that they become more happy and effective in both work and private life.

Measurement of performance vs. learning goals and 'approaching' vs. 'avoidance' goals

The next part of the training session asks the question whether an individual's "goal" is primarily 'approaching' or 'avoiding', and towards 'learning' or 'performance' (Dweck, 1986; Latham, 2007).

'Approaching' goal	Seeking to expand one's own capabilities and skills. 3	Demonstration one's competence 2
'Avoiding' goal	Seeking to avoid loss or stagnation of competence 0	Acting to avoid revealing oneself to be incompetent 1
	Learning goal	**Performance goal**

Figure 1: A typology of goals adapted from Heckhausen & Heckhausen (2008, p. 412)

People with an 'avoidance' goal orientation focus on finding ways to avoid tasks where they may be shown to be incompetent and making a negative impression on others. Those with an 'approaching' goal orientation, on the other hand, focus on the demonstration of their competencies or the expansion of their skills (VandeWalle, Cron & Slocum, 2001).

The second dichotomy is between "learning goals" where a person focuses on mastery (e.g. of a skill or body of knowledge) and "performance goals", where a person is focussed on achieving a specific outcome (e.g. Olympic medal or level of performance). Figure 1 organises the goal orientation and type of goal in a 2 X 2 matrix that is helpful in diagnosis.

Generally "performance orientation" is negatively correlated with important psychological variables like self-efficacy (Phillips & Gully, 1997, cf. Latham, 2007). However, the literature indicates that there are many positive effects associated with the setting of learning goals, such as positive correlation to openness to experiences and optimism, high internal locus of control, desire for hard work, and effort (cf. Latham, 2007). It also can be shown that pursuing 'avoidance' goals is generally associated with negative emotions such as the feeling of being emotionally drained. This is not the case for 'approaching' goals (Latham, 2007, Dickson, 2006).

The aim of the training session is therefore to analyse the participant's goals (whether they are primarily towards 0, 1, 2, or 3) and, if necessary, help them to change their goals towards "approaching" and 'learning' goals as much as possible. This is not always possible, but the more the participants move from an 'avoiding' performance goal to an 'approaching' performance or learning goal, the more positive are the emotions associated with the pursuit of the goals and the greater the likelihood of attaining those goals. Because learning and 'approaching' goals are highly (positively), correlated with characteristics proven to be important for people's occupational performance (e.g. self-fficacy or high internal locus of control) this part of the training course is again especially relevant for employees and managers.

Measurement of explicit and implicit motives

The last part of the goal setting training is mainly based on Kehr's (2002; 2004) "Self Management Training" approach which draws on the distinction between implicit and explicit motivation systems (cf. McClelland, 1980). Implicit motives are postulated to be largely unconscious (motives of the heart) whilst explicit motives are conscious (motives of the head).

This distinction is of importance as the setting of long-term developmental goals is more influenced by implicit motives whilst short term conscious choices are more influenced by the explicit motive system (McClelland, Koestner & Weinberger, 1989). Furthermore due to their relative independence (Brunstein, Schultheiss & Grässmann, 1998), the two motivational systems might not support each other, leading to lower motivation. This could be the case if, for example, a person pursued the goal of a career as a librarian (explicit motive system) mainly to please their parents, who think it is a worthy profession. However, this goal may fail to satisfy a high implicit motive for 'affiliation', requiring an environment with much more social interaction than that offered by a library to satisfy it. This would have a negative impact on his/her career as a librarian because this career goal is not supported by the implicit motive structure. Unfortunately research has shown that people all to often set themselves goals which are not aligned to their implicit motive structure (cf. Brunstein, Schultheiss and Graessman (1998, p. 495).

Therefore the last section of the training course is about the modification of goals according to the implicit motives structure of each participant – which requires access to the implicit as well as the explicit motive system.

Assessment of explicit motives is achieved using Jackson's (1984) Personality Research Form, which measures achievement, affiliation and power motives and distinguishes between 'approaching' and 'avoiding' orientations.

To assess the implicit motive structure the "MultiMotivGrid" (MMG) by Sokolowski et al. (2000) is used. This instrument is a semi-projective diagnostic tool that is more readily accepted by users than the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT; Kehr, 2004a). As with the TAT the MMG uses pictorial stimulus material but instead of requiring participants to write stories, asks them to answer a predetermined set of questions. These questions are repeated for each of the 14 pictorial stimuli presented and probe the three motives. After viewing pictorial stimuli, which are mainly of ambiguous situations (as for the TAT) the participants have to indicate, with a YES or NO, whether or not they agree with statements relating to the six sub-motives. These comprise:

Achievement
- Feeling confident to succeed at this task.
- Thinking about lacking abilities at this task.

Affiliation
- Feeling good about meeting other people.
- Being afraid of being rejected by others.

Power
- Hoping to acquire a good standing.
- Anticipating to lose standing.

The comparison between the implicit and explicit values on achievement, power and affiliation gives each participant the possibility to reflect on any contrast between their explicit motives (what they consciously consider to be driving them) and their implicit motives (what they require to satisfy them at a deeper level). This comparison can be used to analyse and, if need be, to modify their goals to be more in line with their implicit motives. Kehr (2004a) has shown that the more an individual's goals are in line with their implicit motive structure the higher the likelihood of them achieving these goals.

Conclusion

The goal setting training presented integrates several approaches to goal setting to give participants the opportunity to reflect on and modify their personal goals. The main advantage of this training programme is that it is built on acknowledged research findings by leading authors on goal setting. The three main topics of the training are all underpinned by a substantial amount of empirical evidence. Therefore the major merit of the training programme is the integration of three separate areas of goal setting into a common framework and the "translation" of empirical findings into a more practical language designed for training purposes.

Three sets of preliminary evaluation data (N = 104) further show that various target groups -entrepreneurs, managers, postgraduate students, and mature students at an open university course studying Human Resource Management and already working in the HRM field - do appreciate the contents delivered and find the training helpful for their work as well as their private lives (see figure 2).

Target group	Question	M	SD	Range
Entrepreneurs (N = 69)	The training provided comprehensive coverage of the subject.	4.4	.69	1 (not at all) to 5 (very much)
	The training provided practical skills which can be used immediately.	4.4	.74	1 (not at all) to 5 (very much)
	The training focuses on each individual delegate's needs.	4.8	.42	1 (not at all) to 5 (very much)

Target group	Question	M	SD	Range
Managers, Post Graduate Students (N = 34)	Altogether, I am very satisfied with the training.	6.2	.83	1 (not at all) to 7 (very much)
	The training will be useful at work.	5.6	1.2	1 (not at all) to 7(very much)
	The training will be useful in my private life.	5.8	1.2	1 (not at all) to 7 (very much)
Open University students (HRM) (N = 11)	Altogether, I enjoyed the training course.	4.9	.30	1 (not at all) to 5 (very much)
	The course showed how to apply the training to work and private life.	4.5	.52	1 (not at all) to 5 (very much)

Figure 2: Preliminary evaluation data on the goal setting training course

In conclusion, one can say that the training has proven to be applicable and useful for various target groups and for different types of organisation (universities and other HE institutions, entrepreneur programme's and open courses with managers from various industries). The academic goal setting literature has provided the basis for an accessible approach to improving people's goal setting skills.

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