Goal Commitment and the Goal-Setting Process: Problems, Prospects, and Proposals for Future Research

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The purpose of this article is to examine the role of goal commitment in goal-setting research. Despite Locke's (1968) specification that commitment to goals is a necessary condition for the effectiveness of goal setting, a majority of studies in this area have ignored goal commitment. In addition, results of studies that have examined the effects of goal commitment were typically inconsistent with conceptualization of commitment as a moderator. Building on past research, we have developed a model of the goal commitment process and then used it to reinterpret past goal-setting research. We show that the widely varying sizes of the effect of goal difficulty, conditional effects of goal difficulty, and inconsistent results with variables such as participation can largely be traced to main and interactive effects of the variables specified by the model.

The major finding emanating from the widespread research on goal setting is that difficult and specific goals lead to higher levels of performance than do easy or vague goals (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). There is some evidence to suggest, however, that one or more variables may act to moderate the relation between goal difficulty and task performance. First, the goal difficulty effect does not always result (e.g., Motowidlo, Loehr, & Dunnette, 1978; Oldham, 1975; Organ, 1977), and when it does, the size of the effect varies widely, from .03 (Dossett, Latham, & Saari, 1980) to .77 (Locke & Bryan, 1967). Second, the effect of goal difficulty, especially in field settings, tends to be conditional on the presence or the level of other variables (Carroll & Tosi, 1970; Dossett, Latham, & Mitchell, 1979; Hall & Hall, 1976; Ivancevich & McMahon, 1977; Latham & Saari, 1979a). Third, results are highly inconsistent with respect to the role played by other key variables such as monetary incentives (e.g., Locke, Bryan, & Kendall, 1968, vs. Pritchard & Curts, 1973), participation (Dossett et al., 1979, vs. Latham & Yukl, 1976) and individual differences (French, Kay, & Meyer, 1966, vs. Seafoss & Monczka, 1973) in the goal-setting process.

Goal commitment was one of the first potential moderating variables recognized by Locke (1968), who stated that people who "stop trying when confronted by a hard task (i.e., those uncommitted to a goal) are people who have decided that the goal is impossible to reach and who no longer are trying for that goal" (p. 164). The notion that goal commitment was a necessary condition for the goal difficulty effect was central to early theorizing on goal setting, because at that time, a number of empirical studies supported achievement motivation theory (Atkinson & Feather, 1966) and its emphasis on goals of moderate difficulty. The results of these studies, which apparently contradict goal-setting theory, were attributed by Locke (1968) to a lack of commitment to the difficult goals set in studies of achievement motivation.

Goal commitment, according to Locke et al. (1981), refers to the determination to try for a goal. Commitment implies the extension of effort, over time, toward the accomplishment of an original goal and emphasizes an unwillingness to abandon or to lower the original goal (Campion & Lord, 1982). In addition, because of the central importance of goal difficulty in determining performance, our emphasis is on commitment to difficult goals, rather than to goals in general. There is little in the literature to advocate the use of easy goals; hence, the commitment to such goals is not a major issue.

Commitment to difficult goals should also be distinguished from acceptance of difficult goals, which merely refers to the initial use of a goal assigned by another person as a referent. Goal acceptance does not necessarily imply that the individual is bound to the standard. The present review deals conceptually with goal commitment because commitment is more critical for predicting performance. For example, one can initially accept a difficult goal and yet not demonstrate subsequent commitment to that goal over time. If commitment is a necessary condition, then the effect of goal difficulty would not be forthcoming in such an instance, despite initial goal acceptance. Although these concepts are distinguishable, note that (a) there is a considerable overlap between them, (b) they have been used almost interchangeably in past research, and (c) there is not complete consensus as to the separateness of these constructs. Because they have been used interchangeably in the past, it is impossible to determine whether the original authors are using commitment or acceptance as we have defined. Therefore, for purposes of this article, any study mentioning either commitment or acceptance is treated as dealing with commitment, and hence is included here.

Given the critical role assigned to goal commitment by early researchers on goal setting, and both theoretical and empirical
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Evidence (Erez & Zidon, 1984; Locke, 1982; Organ, 1977) that suggests goal commitment is inversely related to goal difficulty, the assessment of goal commitment should have played a prominent role in subsequent goal-setting research. Rather, in the majority of empirical studies reviewed (66 of 109, or 61%), no mention whatsoever is made of goal commitment. In another 12% of these studies, goal commitment was mentioned but never empirically assessed. In the remaining studies, goal commitment has been treated in many different ways (e.g., as a main effect variable), generally inconsistent with Locke's (1968) formulation. To date only three studies have examined commitment and tested its role as a moderator of the goal-difficulty-performance relation.

The purpose of this article is to use past empirical research and expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964) to develop a model of the antecedents and consequences of commitment to difficult goals. This model is then used to reinterpret the results of past goal-setting research (where goal commitment was not explicitly considered) and to provide direction for future research. The article is organized into four subsections dealing with (a) past empirical research, (b) the expectancy theory model, (c) reinterpretation of past research, and (d) future research directions.

Past Empirical Research on Goal Commitment

Because it is our intention to develop a model of (a) the consequences of goal commitment that is consistent with Locke's (1968) moderator formulation and (b) the antecedents of commitment to difficult goals consistent with expectancy theory, only two lines of past research are examined here. First, we describe the handful of studies that have attempted to test the moderating effects of goal commitment on the goal-difficulty-performance relation, and second, we examine research that has treated goal commitment as a dependent variable.

Studies Treating Goal Commitment as a Moderator Variable

Only three studies have tested Locke's (1968) conception of goal commitment as a moderator of the goal-difficulty-task-performance relation. Erez and Zidon (1984) found a moderating effect for goal commitment on the goal-difficulty-performance relation, whereas Frost and Mahoney (1976) and Yukl and Latham (1978) did not. Explaining these inconsistent results is difficult for several methodological reasons. First, each of these studies used only a single-item measure of commitment, and therefore, differences in reliability of measurement cannot be assessed. Second, because each study used a different item, the relative validity of each becomes questionable. Third, the studies also differ in timing of measurement, in that Erez and Zidon (1984) and Yukl and Latham (1978) measured commitment prior to having subjects engage in the task, whereas Frost and Mahoney (1976) measured it after task completion. Self-reports of goal commitment collected after task completion when the subject has complete information on both the nature of the task and the outcome relative to the goal, are hardly equivalent to measures obtained prior to subjects' engaging in the task. Finally, differential range restriction could also explain the discrepant results. Erez and Zidon (1984) designed their study to ensure variation in goal commitment, whereas Yukl and Latham (1978) stated that only 2% of subjects were not committed to their assigned goal. Frost and Mahoney (1976) failed to report the amount of variation in their measure of commitment. Suffice to say that there have been few, if any, adequate tests of Locke's original conceptualization of goal commitment as a necessary condition for the goal difficulty effect.

Studies Treating Goal Commitment as a Dependent Variable

One commonly investigated antecedent of goal commitment has been participation, with most studies hypothesizing a positive relation between these variables. A series of studies by Latham and his associates (Dossett et al., 1979; Latham & Marshall, 1982; Latham, Mitchell, & Dossett, 1978; Latham & Saari, 1979a, 1979b; Latham & Steele, 1983; Latham, Steele, & Saari, 1982) have not supported this hypothesis; it has been supported, however, in studies by Erez, Early, and Hulin (1985) and by French et al. (1966).

The studies just described have largely searched for the determinants of goal commitment without the guidance of any wide-ranging theory. Other researchers, although they did not all examine goal commitment per se, have used an expectancy theory framework (Vroom, 1964) to study the goal-setting process. Dachler and Mobley (1973), Kalb and Boyatzis (1970), Locke, Frederick, Lee, and Bobko (1984), and Steers (1975) found that the expected probability of obtaining a goal was positively related to goal commitment. Mentz, Cartledge, and Locke (1980) suggested, however, that commitment may drop off at the extreme upper end of the expected probability continuum.

Valence, another major component of expectancy theory, has also been reported to be a determinant of goal commitment. All three of the relevant studies have found positive relations (Dossett et al., 1979; Mento et al., 1980; Oldham, 1975). In summary, expectancy theory may be a useful approach for increasing our understanding of the determinants of commitment to difficult goals.

Expectancy Theory Model of the Goal Commitment Process

The possibility of integrating expectancy theory and goal-setting theory via goal commitment has been recognized previously (Dachler & Mobley, 1973; Dossett et al., 1979; Kalb & Boyatzis, 1970; Mento et al., 1980; Oldham, 1975; Steers, 1975). Furthermore, Locke et al. (1981) suggested that "the factors that affect goal acceptance... fit easily into two major categories, which are the main components of expectancy theory" (p. 144). Locke et al. (1981) then listed variables likely to affect expectations of goal attainment and attractiveness of goal attainment. One purpose of the model presented here is to expand on this earlier work by (a) suggesting additional variables likely to be associated with either the attractiveness or...
tancy of goal attainment and (b) differentiating between situational and personal determinants of attractiveness and expectancy. The value of this differentiation lies in the ability to specify person by situation interactions that are the cornerstone of interactional psychology (Ekehammer, 1974; Endler & Magnusson, 1976). The recognition that such interactions may exist will be of central importance in a later section of this article.

A second purpose of this model is to reinterpret results from previous goal-setting studies in which the goal difficulty effect did not emerge or was conditional on the presence of other variables. Although commitment was not directly measured in these studies, the model developed here proposes that many studies have, in fact, shown the goal commitment by goal difficulty interaction. That is, conditional results or weak effect sizes can be directly attributed to the variables measured in these studies, which this model proposes as antecedents of commitment.

Figure 1 presents a model of the antecedent factors that may enhance the commitment to difficult goals. The antecedents of commitment are broken down first by whether they affect attractiveness or expectancy, and then further delineated by whether they are of a personal or situational nature. Note that the model is meant to illustrate the way in which many variables previously studied in this area could be theoretically linked to goal commitment, and is not meant to be a comprehensive or exhaustive list. Figure 1 also suggests, in line with the formulations of Locke (1968), that the primary consequence of goal commitment is to moderate the relation between goal difficulty and task performance. Under certain conditions goal difficulty may generate a main effect. For example, when only difficult goals are established, all else being equal, greater commitment will lead to greater performance (Locke et al., 1984). However, when the entire range of goals are represented in a sample (i.e., easy, moderate, difficult) no such main effect will be in evidence.

Situational Factors Affecting the Attractiveness of Goal Attainment

Several variables discussed by Salancik (1977) in the context of organizational commitment are worth noting here. One aspect of the situation that tends to increase commitment according to Salancik is publicness, that is, the extent to which significant others are aware of one's goal. It is easy to abandon a goal known only to oneself. If, however, many significant others are aware of the goal, then abandoning this goal in midstream is somewhat unattractive because it makes one appear inconsistent. Empirical support for this consistency prediction can be found in nonorganizational studies by Dweck and Gilliard (1975) and Pallak and Cummings (1976).

A second important factor related to commitment mentioned by Salancik (1977) is volition, defined as the extent to which an individual is free to engage in a behavior. Volition should be closely associated with goal origin in that self-set goals imply volition, assigned goals imply little volition, and participatively set goals lie somewhere in between these two extremes. Assigned goals can be abandoned without appearing inconsistent as much as the goal can easily be discounted as unrealistic and the person assigning it can easily be discounted as being out of touch. Such a cognitive response is less likely when the person chooses the goal. Empirical support for this proposition comes from research by Erez et al. (1985). In both a laboratory and a field setting, they showed that groups allowed to establish their own goals exhibited higher goal commitment relative to groups that were assigned goals.

Explicitness is a third factor described by Salancik (1977) as being a key determinant of commitment. As recognized early in the goal-setting literature, vague goals are not as effective in bringing about high performance (Locke, 1968). Salancik's (1977) theory, however, provides the rationale for why these vague goals may be of little value. There are innumerable outcomes that could be consistent with a vague goal. Reducing one's weight by 1 ounce is consistent with the goal of "losing some weight this year." The number of outcomes consistent with the goal of "losing 10 pounds by August 1" is much smaller.

Many other situational factors could act to increase goal commitment by increasing the attractiveness of goal attainment. The importance of reward structures in influencing behavior has been widely documented in the field of organizational behavior. For example, the amount of authority that supervisors have in terms of rewarding or punishing subordinates may be related to goal commitment. This would be analogous to conclusions made in the feedback literature that the desire to respond to feedback is related to the power of the feedback source (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979). Competition may also be related to goal commitment. Pressure generated by competitive situations may increase the desire to reach a goal beyond that which would be the case in the absence of such pressures. There is even empirical evidence to suggest that competition leads to goal choices that are unrealistically high (Forward & Zander, 1971).

Personal Factors Affecting the Attractiveness of Goal Attainment

Figure 1 also specifies several personal variables that are likely to lead to greater commitment to difficult goals by increasing the attractiveness of goal attainment. These variables are classified as personal in the sense that variation across individuals on these dimensions stems more from factors within the individual, as opposed to factors within the situation, and deals with constructs such as needs, beliefs, attitudes, and personality traits.

Individuals with high need for achievement are characterized by McClelland (1961) as having a preference for challenging tasks, for immediate feedback, and for situations in which it is possible to take personal responsibility. Given this description, it might be predicted that individuals with high need for achievement would exhibit greater commitment to challenging goals than would those with low need for achievement.

Moreover, empirical evidence suggests that variables that are positively related to the level of goal choice (i.e., degree of difficulty) under self-set goal conditions are also related to commitment to assigned goals (Early, 1985; Hollenbeck & Brief, in press). Therefore, studies showing personal variables affecting goal-level choices will be explicitly interpreted here as providing indirect evidence that those same variables would be related to goal commitment (Campbell, 1982). Hence, studies that indicate that subjects with high need for achievement set more
difficult goals than their counterparts with low need for achievement (Yukl & Latham, 1978) provide indirect evidence that need for achievement may be related to commitment to difficult goals.

Another personality variable that may be relevant to goal commitment is endurance. According to Jackson (1974) the individual high in endurance is “willing to work long hours; doesn’t give up quickly on a problem; persevering even in the face of great difficulty; patient and unrelenting” (p. 6). Individuals high on this trait would seem much less likely to abandon difficult goals than those low in endurance.

A final personality variable that might relate to goal commitment is the degree of Type A behavior pattern. Type A people are characterized as being aggressive and competitive, setting high standards, and putting themselves under constant time pressures (Friedman & Rosenman, 1974). It would appear that Type A individuals, when faced with difficult goals, are much more likely to redouble their efforts than to lower their goals or aspirations. Indirect evidence for this link can be found in a study by Taylor, Locke, Lee, and Gist (1984), who found that Type A individuals set more difficult goals than Type B individuals.

An individual’s work-related attitudes could also be expected to relate to goal commitment by increasing the attractiveness of goal attainment. For example, organizational commitment has been defined as the relative strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in a particular organization. Given their strong identification with organizational goals in
general, it is quite likely that individuals high in organizational commitment would also be committed to operative goals established for them by the organization. Furthermore, the willingness to extend considerable effort for the organization suggests that in the face of obstacles, organizationally committed workers would tend to increase their efforts rather than modify their goals.

Job involvement is an attitude similar to organizational commitment, but the focus of identification is with the job itself rather than any one particular organization. Individuals who are highly job involved are distinguished by a strong association between their job performance and their self-esteem. Because performance on the job is central to their self-concept, highly job involved individuals would be more likely to demonstrate commitment to challenging work goals than those low in job involvement.

Situational Factors Affecting the Expectancy of Goal Attainment

One situational factor likely to have a strong impact on goal commitment because of its effects on expectancy, is social influence with respect to (a) others' performance (b) others' goals, and (c) others' goal commitment. For example, several studies have shown that knowledge of how others have performed influences self-set goal difficulty (Festinger, 1942; Lewin, Dembo, Festinger & Sears, 1944; Rakestaw & Weiss, 1981). Given this relation, it could be argued that information about others' performance would also be related to commitment to difficult goals, regardless of their origin. Indeed, Early and Kanfer (1985) manipulated the performance levels of a role model and found that subjects who viewed a high-performing role model demonstrated higher goal commitment than those who saw a low-performing model. Similarly, Bandura (1977) has shown that individuals will set high personal performance standards when they see others adopting such standards. An individual's commitment to difficult goals probably will be higher when those around him or her have similar goals, as opposed to when those around him or her have easier goals. Finally and most directly, the level of goal commitment shown by others may influence the individual's level of goal commitment. It is unlikely that an individual will maintain goal commitment when the majority of his or her co-workers are perceived as quickly abandoning goals.

Task characteristics may also be related to goal commitment. For example, on difficult or complex tasks, the link between effort and performance will not be as strong as on simple tasks. Research by Earley (1985) and Steers and Porter (1974) has documented this relation between task characteristics and goal commitment. One aspect of a task that may be critical for determining goal commitment may be the extent to which there are a number of external influences on task outcomes. Peters and O'Conner (1980) have emphasized the influence of situational constraints on work outcomes such as performance and satisfaction. The presence of such performance constraints is also likely to diminish the expectancy of goal attainment. Goal commitment would be low under such circumstances because failure to achieve the goal can be readily attributed to factors beyond the individual's control.

Finally, supervisor supportiveness may be related to goal commitment. Supervisor supportiveness was defined by Latham and Saari (1979b) as, among other things, friendliness and listening to employees' opinions. Difficult goals assigned by such supervisors will probably be perceived as fairer and more realistic, causing goal commitment to be higher. In support of this contention, Oldham (1975) directly showed that a measure of supervisory trust was positively correlated with goal commitment. Latham and Saari (1979b) provided indirect evidence in that supportive supervision was positively associated with selected goal level for subjects in participative conditions. In this latter study, the low alpha reliability (.53) associated with the commitment measure precluded detecting more direct evidence.

Personal Factors Affecting the Expectancy of Goal Attainment

Two personal variables likely to result in increased commitment to difficult goals are perceived ability and past success. The extensive literature on level of aspiration (Frank, 1941) documents the fact that, in general, future goals are higher following success than when following failure. Also, a number of studies have used self-set goals and found that self-set goal levels are strongly related to ability (Campion & Lord, 1982; Locke et al., 1984; Matsu, Okada, & Kakuyama, 1982). Similarly, subjects with high-perceived task-related ability (or self-efficacy) would be predicted to have higher expectations for achieving difficult goals, and thus higher commitment to those goals relative to low-ability subjects. Empirical support for this hypothesized relation is evidenced in a study by Locke et al. (1984) in a laboratory setting.

Hall's (1971) psychological success theory posits a linkage between self-esteem and goal commitment. Although not explicitly stated in Hall's model, the higher self-confidence that characterizes high-self-esteem persons is probably associated with high-perceived probabilities for attaining difficult goals. Empirical research on this model has shown that high self-esteem is associated with the choice of high goal levels (Hall & Foster, 1977).

Finally, locus of control may also be a personality variable that is related to goal commitment. Individuals with an external locus of control, because of their perceived inability to affect their environment, would tend to show low goal commitment. Individuals with an internal locus of control, on the other hand, when faced with a difficult goal would perceive it possible, but merely requiring more effort. Perhaps it was for this reason that in a study by Yukl & Latham (1978), employees with an internal locus of control were willing to set more difficult goals than were employees with an external locus of control.

Interactions Across Categories

The model shown in Figure 1 attempts to delineate, more concretely, the direct antecedents and consequences of goal commitment. Although only main effects have been discussed here, the possibility for interactions both within and across categories should be recognized.

Expectancy theorists (cf. Vroom, 1964) clearly predict an in-
interaction between attractiveness and expectancy; therefore, one might predict interactions between situational characteristics that differentially affect attractiveness and expectancy. For example, volition may be related to commitment only where there are not substantial constraints on performance. Where there are external constraints on performance, abandoning the original goal appears neither inconsistent nor irrational because these external factors make the original goal unrealistic.

Similar interactions could be specified between personal variables that differentially affect attractiveness and expectancy. Self-esteem, for example, may be related to goal commitment only when it occurs in conjunction with job involvement. High self-esteem individuals who are uninvolved with their work may not be as confident in being successful in the work role. Indeed, it is often found that task-specific self-esteem is a much better predictor of work behavior than is generalized self-esteem (Tharenou & Harker, 1982).

Person by situation interactions within attractiveness or expectancy categories are also possible. An interaction may exist between competition and Type A behavior pattern in determining the attractiveness of the goal attained, in that competition fails to motivate Type B individuals (Friedman & Rosenman, 1974). Expectancy of goal attainment might additionally be an interactive function of social influence and past performance. Rakestraw and Weiss (1981) found, for instance, that only subjects without prior task experience were influenced by a model's goal-setting behavior. When an individual has a long history of past performance, immediate social influence may not affect goal commitment. Finally, although not explicitly depicted in Figure 1, the possibility of feedback loops should be recognized. That is, personal and situational characteristics are not static, and task performance could have dynamic effects on our proposed antecedents such as perceived past performance, job involvement, and supervisor supportiveness.

Reinterpretation of Past Research

The importance of increasing our understanding of the role of goal commitment in the goal-setting process is highlighted by reinterpreting past research in light of the model shown in Figure 1. The lack of effects of goal difficulty, the presence of conditional effects of goal difficulty, and inconsistent results using similar key variables across studies may be, in many cases, attributable to variation in goal commitment. Note that the studies discussed ahead provide only indirect evidence for the model and are hardly a substitute for more direct empirical examinations of the linkages suggested. Their discussion will hopefully convey that the preponderance of indirect evidence on this issue warrants direct examination by future research.

Studies Failing to Establish Effects of Goal Difficulty

Several studies that found insignificant or negligible effects may be explained by subjects' lack of goal commitment. For example, in a study by Organ (1977) no group performance average reached the level of the moderate goal. Because subjects had prior task experience, they could have easily perceived the appreciably harder "difficult" goal as unrealistic and hence may have failed to become committed, because of low expectations. Indeed, this would explain the inverse relation between goal difficulty and commitment found in this study.

Motowidlo et al. (1978) found that performance was highest for the low-goal condition (where expectancy of goal attainment was high) rather than in the high-goal condition (where expectations of goal attainment were low). In this study, however, subjects did not make their expectancy ratings conditional on trying their best. Because of this, the low expectancy reported for the difficult goals may simply reflect a lack of commitment to the originally established goal.

Ivancevich (1976) and Latham and Yukl (1975) found no significant effects of goal difficulty in field samples. In both of these cases, however, a lack of organizational support was offered as a possible explanation for these lack of results. As is shown in Figure 1, however, the effects of low organizational support were possibly mediated by a resultant decrease in goal commitment.

Finally, Oldham (1975) failed to find a significant effect of goal difficulty in a study where performance on a time-sheet completion task was the dependent variable. A substantial number of subjects did not, however, accept the assigned goals established in this study. The results from other studies that failed to replicate the effect of goal difficulty could possibly be attributed to a lack of goal commitment, but because no assessment of goal commitment was ever attempted, this is impossible to ascertain (e.g., Bavelas & Lee, 1978; Forward & Zander, 1971; Hall & Foster, 1977; Steers, 1975).

Studies Establishing Conditional Effects of Goal Difficulty

According to Locke et al. (1981), relative to laboratory studies, "the majority of the correlational [i.e., of the field] studies found only a conditional positive relation between goal difficulty and performance" (p. 129). It is instructive to look at these studies in light of the model presented here, because many of the variables on which the effect of goal difficulty was contingent are described here as antecedents of goal commitment. Therefore, whereas the situation appears to be complex or chaotic (i.e., a large number of moderating influences), the situation may be much simpler (i.e., one major moderating influence—goal commitment—that is influenced by a large number of other variables).

For example, Carroll and Tosi (1970) found an effect of goal difficulty only for self-assured managers. Such a result would be predicted from the model in Figure 1, inasmuch as self-esteem is positively related to goal commitment and goal commitment moderates the goal-difficulty-performance relation. In studies, both Ivancevich and McMahon (1977) and Steers (1975) found effects of goal difficulty only for subjects with strong higher order need strength. Because there is substantial overlap between need for achievement and higher order need strength, it is probably the case that individuals with higher order need strength simply exhibit greater goal commitment.

Goal commitment, according to the model developed here, is also higher when there are no situational constraints on performance and there is high supervisory support. It should not be surprising, therefore, that for a sample of elementary school children, an effect of goal difficulty was found only in schools offering high support (Hall & Hall, 1976). Finally, Dachler and
Mobley (1973) found an effect of goal difficulty only for long-tenured employees. There is a substantial amount of literature that suggests that tenure is associated with both job involvement (Rabinowitz & Hall, 1977) and organizational commitment (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979) and, therefore, it is again apparent that the effects of goal commitment can at least partially explain an unexpected moderating effect.

Studies Yielding Inconsistent Results With Key Variables

Results of studies that have examined monetary incentives, participation, and individual differences show considerable uncertainty with respect to the roles these variables play in the goal-setting process. Locke et al. (1968) found that monetary incentives lead to setting goals of increased difficulty. This finding was not replicated by Chung and Vickery (1976); Latham et al. (1978); London and Oldham (1976); Pritchard and Curtis (1973); Terborg (1976); or Terborg and Miller (1978). Thus, one cannot conclude that monetary incentives lead to increased goal difficulty. Saari and Latham (1980) found that monetary incentives increased the frequency with which individuals set difficult goals on their own. Terborg (1976) and Terborg and Miller (1978) failed to replicate this finding, however, so it cannot be concluded that money leads to goal setting in situations wherein there would normally be no goals.

More plausibly, as suggested originally by Locke (1968) and in the model presented here, monetary incentives (or the reward structure in general) tend to increase goal commitment. Inconsistent results emerge because whereas goal commitment is a necessary condition for the goal difficulty effect, monetary incentives are not a necessary condition for goal commitment. That is, a situation may not contain monetary incentives yet still generate goal commitment through other means, such as publicness or social influence. When it is recognized that the key variable is goal commitment, it becomes apparent that one cannot make any simple prediction about the effects of monetary incentives. Rather, some assessment must be made of the relative contribution that monetary incentives make to goal commitment, over and above what is already available from other variables.

Even more inconsistent results have been obtained regarding participation. In some cases, participation resulted in higher goals (Latham et al., 1978; Latham & Yukl, 1975). In the latter study, participation interacted with individual differences to determine performance; that is, participatively set goals lead to higher performance only for educated workers (Latham & Yukl, 1975). A number of studies holding goal difficulty constant found no differences in commitment between participatively set versus assigned goals (Dossett et al., 1979; Latham & Mitchell, 1972; Latham & Saari, 1979a; Latham & Yukl, 1976). In other studies, participation seemed to play no significant role in the goal-setting process (Carroll & Tosi, 1970; Ivancevich, 1976).

The expectancy theory model of goal commitment provided here may be able to add some clarity to the situation. As discussed earlier, participation in the goal-setting process may increase volition, which in turn, may increase goal commitment. Clearly, self-set goals imply volition, whereas assigned goals do not. Participative goal setting lies somewhere between these extremes, and without observing the actual joint goal-setting session, it is difficult to ascertain how much input subordinates had in establishing these participative goals. When the subordinate sees his or her input to be low, goal commitment will be low; when this input is perceived to be high, goal commitment will be higher (Erez et al., 1985). Again, it has to be noted that although increasing subordinate perceptions of input into the goal-setting process may be sufficient to bring about goal commitment, it is not a necessary condition for goal commitment.

According to Locke et al. (1981) "the only consistent thing about the studies of individual differences in goal setting is their inconsistency" (p. 156). The model provided here may prove instrumental in understanding the underlying reasons for these confusing results. Individual differences, according to the model, are personal factors that affect goal commitment through attractiveness or expectancy of goal attainment. Any personal factor that affects attractiveness may interact with another variable (either personal or situational) that affects expectancy and vice versa. Also, any personal factor that affects the attractiveness of goal attainment, may be substituted for by a situational variable that also affects attractiveness. For example, Steers (1975) found that goals lead to performance only for subjects with high need for achievement (i.e., a personal factor affecting attractiveness). Yet subjects with a low need for achievement performed well when they were allowed to participate in goal setting. It would appear that in this case, need for achievement was enough to bring about commitment in some subjects, but subjects low in this need required something else (in this case, volition) to bring about goal commitment. Similar explanations could explain interactions among personality and other variables found in the goal-setting literature (e.g., Latham & Yukl, 1975).

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research

In summary, this article supports several conclusions about the role goal commitment has played in the goal-setting literature. First, despite the fact that the earliest discussions of goal setting (Locke, 1968) specified commitment to goals as a necessary condition for goal setting to work, the majority of studies in this area have completely ignored goal commitment (or acceptance, or both). Furthermore, few investigators examined the effects of goal commitment in a fashion consistent with the conceptualization of commitment as a moderator. To date, there has not been a single study that has tested for the moderating effects of goal commitment on the goal-difficulty–performance relation in a methodologically appropriate fashion (i.e., that did not use single-item measures, measures of low reliability, range restriction, and inappropriate timing of measurement). Studies that treated goal commitment as a dependent variable, have at least provided suggestive evidence on the antecedents to commitment to difficult goals. Building on this past research, one can develop a model of the goal commitment process that breaks down the antecedents of commitment, first by determining whether they affect the attractiveness or expectancy of goal attainment, and second by determining whether they are of a personal or situational nature. When this model is used to reinterpret past goal-setting research, it becomes appar-
ent that the widely varying goal difficulty effect sizes, conditional goal difficulty effects, and inconsistent results with variables such as monetary incentives, participation, and individual differences can largely be traced to main and interactive effects of the variables specified by the model.

Future research in the area of goal setting obviously needs to place greater emphasis on assessing goal commitment. Given the central role of goal commitment in goal-setting theory, this variable should always be measured, even when the goal commitment by goal difficulty interaction is not being tested. If hypothesized goal characteristics do not affect performance, a likely explanation is that there was a low level of commitment to the goal. Direct measurement of commitment would allow this possibility to be tested and would reduce the plethora of other post hoc explanations tangential to goal-setting theory. In addition, future research, perhaps conceptually guided by the expectancy theory model of goal commitment presented, needs to uncover precisely what factors influence goal commitment. The knowledge that one has to assign “difficult” goals, has little value if one does not know how difficult these goals can be before job incumbents become uncommitted and hence abandon those goals.

Future research incorporating these recommendations may lead to a greater understanding of the role that goal commitment plays in the goal-setting process. If it is found that goal commitment is a necessary condition for goal setting to work, then this increased understanding of the antecedents of goal commitment will have critical implications for goal-setting applications, as well as goal-setting theory. Clearly this topic deserves more commitment from goal-setting researchers than has been evident in the past.

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