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Article Summary

The “Practical Significance” of Locke’s Theory of Goal Setting

In 1968 Edwin A. Locke published his theory that setting specific and measurable goals will effectively inspire employees to increase engagement and production. His idea was that people will rise to a challenge and that a little competition can be a big motivator. The article “The Practical Significance of Locke’s Theory of Goal Setting” by Gary P. Latham and J. James Baldes seeks to take Locke’s theory to another level of validity.

Latham and Baldes hypothesized that the effects of goal setting would quickly and consistently result in measurable, improved performance of employees.

This study involved six company logging operations in Oklahoma. There were six trucks, six drivers and six to ten employees in each of the six companies. Loading the trucks was a multi-step process, completed by several different employees. The steps included cutting the tree down, dragging the tree to a specific destination, loading the tree onto the truck, driving the truck to the mill where it was weighed. The data on which the results would be based was the net weights of the 36 trucks, with the goal being the trucks’ reaching 94% of their legal net weight. This gave the workers a specific, quantifiable goal rather than the previous “do your best” directive. There were no additional incentives given to the workers to encourage them to meet or exceed this goal.

The net weight of all 36 trucks was collected and recorded for three months prior to setting the goals, thereby creating a baseline. After the goal was set and communicated to the workers, the net weight of the

36 trucks was collected and recorded for nine consecutive months.

The results of the experiment were swift and substantial. The percentage of legal net weight increased from the low 60s to over 80 within the first month, and continued to climb up over 90 within the next few months. And this higher level of performance continued for the entire nine months of the study. It was determined that giving workers a precise and difficult goal will result in increased productivity. It also provoked the workers to think creatively about ways to improve their performance even more and likely gave them all an increased sense of accomplishment. This study was further evidence that Locke's theory was correct and sustainable.

One limitation of the study might be the type of logs being cut and collected. Different types of wood of a similar size will have a higher or lower weight, and that could perhaps affect the study. The study does not mention if all the logs were of the same type or not. Another consideration might be employee turnover and/or accidents. Training a new employee can be time consuming and not always successful.

An additional component that could be added to this study would be to also offer a monetary incentive to the workers. Money seems to be a big motivator for most people, and doing this might also keep the performance from flatlining over time. It would be interesting to see this study over a five-year period as well.