



# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *Goal Setting as a Means of Increasing Motivation*

Bryan, J. and E. Locke (1967). "Goal Setting As A Means of Increasing Motivation." *Journal of Applied Psychology* 51(3): 3.

**Key Words:** Goal setting, performance, motivation

### Summary/Conclusions

The current study was completed in 1967 and sought to discover how goal setting could influence motivation and performance on a task. Subjects were told to either "Do your best" on an initial test. On second and third tests, individuals were told to either "do your best" or to "meet or exceed their previous performance". The study discovered that there was a significant increase in performance when individuals had goals. Conversely there was a significant decline in performance in the "do your best" group.

### Limitations of Information

The study was completed on a small sample size and may not apply to all populations. While the study was completed on individuals with low motivation, it is not clear if involuntary goal setting produces similar results. The researchers were not supervising the subjects. Supervision may create power dynamics that may lead to increased or decreased goal setting effects. Time between tests may have impacted individuals differently, which was not accounted for in the study.

**Caveat:** The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

### Using Goals to Increase Performance

This RIB is the first in a series of RIBS looking-back to review classic research. The current study is an original experiment from 1967 conducted on goal setting. Researchers Bryan and Locke sought to discover how specific goals influence performance and motivation. Utilizing a pool of 20 male and female subjects from the University of Maryland, researchers conducted three separate rounds of similar tests. Only the top six and bottom six performing participants progressed to test II and III. The tests asked a series of double digit addition questions. Tests were arranged in a series of timed waves. Waves varied in length, starting with quicker timed waves and ending with longer durations of waves. Between timed waves, subjects were asked to rate their attitudes toward interest/boredom, task focus (time and intensity), and effort. Researchers calculated motivation through performance on the timed waves. Individuals who were less motivated completed fewer problems compared to motivated individuals who completed more problems.

After the first wave, the top six performers were instructed to "do their best" on subsequent tests occurring over the next few months. The bottom six performers were asked to outperform their previous attempts by 10%. Participants tests were informed of their previous performance so they could improve on future attempts.

The results of the experiment showed

that the "goal group" was able to improve, reaching their goal 46% of the time on test II and 62% of the time on test III. The "do their best" group actually declined in performance across the three tests. Even when the "goal group" lacked motivation they increased performance.

### Practical Applications with Probationers:

- √ Engage unmotivated probationers in goal setting by setting small, attainable goals. Despite having a low degree of motivation, individuals in the study still increased performance.
- √ Provide feedback on goal progress. Acknowledgement of effort and improvement may momentum.
- √ Consider using questions to elicit additional information for goal setting. Not only does the additional information assist in creating SMART goals, it also facilitates collaboration.

### Practical Applications with Probation Staff:

- √ Engage staff in goal setting related to specific tasks (e.g. assessment fidelity, SBC use, complex reflections). Tailor professional goals to individuals and their future aspirations.
- √ Utilize quality assurance and continuous quality improvement tools to provide specific feedback on how performance has improved over time.

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