The Utility of Fixed and Flexible Goal Sequence

Goals are one way to motivate and improve an individual’s circumstances. Researchers were interested if a fixed or flexible goal sequence influenced goal adoption and completion. The study tested a hypothesis that fixed sequence goals would produce fewer adopters but higher completion rates than flexible structured goals. Researchers conducted four different experiments to test their hypothesis.

Each experiment featured a different task in which individuals would work toward a goal in either a flexible goal sequence or a fixed goal sequence. The tasks consisted of starting a consumer loyalty card program, text transcription, trip planning, and furniture customization. For fixed sequence goals, individuals would progress through tasks outlined in sequential processes. The flexible sequence goals allowed participants freedom to proceed through the sequence in any order. In the final experiment, the researchers also examined goal difficulty to see if the difficulty of a goal had any impact on goal adoption and completion.

All four experiments produced consistent results. Goals with flexible sequences were significantly more likely to be adopted by individuals. However, flexible goal sequences were also more likely to be abandoned before goal completion. Fixed sequence goals are significantly more likely to be completed. Task difficulty had a slight impact on goal adoption but did not have any impact on goal completion. Researchers believe that the fixed structure eliminates a potential cognitive trap of decision paralysis, thus increasing goal completion rates. If participants perceived goals to be too difficult, they were slightly less likely to adopt them.

Practical Applications

- When completing case plans, ask questions that create Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely goals.
- As probationers complete action steps and case plan goals, it may help to check them off to show progress.
- If probationers are struggling completing a goal or action step, it may help to create a fixed order in which the probationer can go about completing the goal or action step.
- Consider having discussions with probationers about goal difficulty. If there are multiple decisions involved consider creating a fixed goal structure.
- Create goals that the probationer can get motivated to complete, focus on what’s important to them.
- Consider developing case plan goals that combine a fixed and flexible structure to see what works best of the individual.
- To increase your skills, think about asking a supervisor or peer for feedback on your case plans using the quality assurance rubric.

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