

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *The Unexpected Positive Impact of Fixed Structures on Goal Completion*

Jin, L., S.-C. Huang, et al. (2013). "The Unexpected Positive Impact of Structures on Goal Completion." *Journal of Consumer Research* 40 (4): 711-725.

**Key Words:** Goals, case planning, engagement, working alliance

### Summary/Conclusions

The current study summarizes four separate field experiments investigating goal adoption and completion on goals that were completed in a flexible (in any order of steps) or fixed (a specific order or steps) sequence. All four experiments found that flexible goals were adopted at a significantly higher rate than goals in a fixed sequence. Conversely, the goal completion rate was significantly higher with a fixed sequence. Interestingly, this result held true with both easy and difficult tasks.

### Limitations of Information

The study was focused on smaller tasks; it is unclear if larger goals influence goal adoption or goal completion rates. This study does not involve involuntary participants and may not represent goal setting as completed by criminal justice practitioners. All the experiments had small samples sizes. No demographic data was collected or controlled for through the experiments. It is also not clear if motivation was consistent in all groups. It is possible some individuals might be naturally more motivated to adopt and complete goals regardless of a fixed or flexible sequence.

**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.

### 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.

State Court Administrator's Office  
Colorado Division of Probation Services, Evaluation Unit  
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