



PARTNER'S CORNER

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Are Your Goals Hard Enough?

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The idea that difficult goals lead to better performance seems counterintuitive, but there's decades of research to back it up. Difficult goals demand our attention and engage the brain. And with that extra neurological horsepower comes enhanced performance. But it's a challenge to create goals that perfectly hit the sweet spot of difficulty. That place right between 'so hard I want to quit' and 'so easy I can't be bothered to try.' Here's a quick way to test whether your goals are difficult enough to inspire optimal performance. Think about one of your own recent goals, or ask your employees to do the same. Then determine whether the following three statements apply:

- I'm really going to have to learn new skills before I'll be able to accomplish this goal.
- My goal is pushing me outside my comfort zone; I'm not frozen with terror, but I'm definitely on 'pins and needles' and wide-awake for this goal.
- When I think about the biggest and most significant accomplishments throughout my life, this current goal is as difficult as those were.

If you can't answer "yes" to all three statements, your goal isn't difficult enough. Just think back to your own accomplishments. Haven't your greatest achievements in life demanded serious work? I'll bet your brain was buzzing and you were perched on pins and needles. It was the challenge- not some reassurance that this goal would be a piece of cake- that inspired you to push past stubborn roadblocks. And it was the challenge that made you embrace (instead of dread) honing your knowledge and learning new skills.

In my recent book, *HARD Goals*, I examine the work of Edwin Locke and Gary Latham. As the pioneers of goal-setting theory, these two psychology professors produced conclusive validation

that people who set (or are given) difficult goals achieve much greater performance levels than do people who set (or are given) weaker goals that send a message of “Just do your best.”

In one study, Professor Latham’s research team worked with Weyerhaeuser (the forestry, wood and paper giant) to study how difficult goals could improve the performance of logging-truck drivers. Ideally, you want logging trucks to come as close as possible to their maximum legal weight. This eliminates multiple runs, which cost time, fuel and additional trucks. But logging trucks present a unique challenge: Logs are all different sizes; they have to be fit on the trucks; weights have to be accurate, etc.

It was determined for this experiment that meeting 94% of the maximum legal net weight would be difficult, but not impossible to achieve. When given a goal of “do your best,” workers loaded the trucks to approximately 60% of the maximum legal net weight (lots of wasted space). But when given the more difficult goal of loading the trucks to 94% of their maximum legal weight, they met the goal, saving Weyerhaeuser about \$250,000 within months.

OK, so setting difficult goals leads to better performance, but how difficult is difficult enough? One determinant of an adequately difficult goal is that it will demand the doer of that goal to have two to four major new learning experiences. This stretches the brain and excites the neurons. The ability to say, “This goal is a breeze, I don’t need to learn anything to ace it,” is a clear sign that goal is underset. Just as if more than four new things need to be learned, that goal is overset.

Adjusting a goal by 30% is usually enough to engage the brain. If you find you still need more difficulty – you aren’t learning two to four new things – then take it up another 30%. If you are oversetting your goals, start by sliding them back 30% and reassess the situation. Stick to the 30% rule because if you start arbitrarily tripling or quadrupling the difficulty of your goals, they will all too quickly go from difficult to impossible.

Everyone’s sweet spot of difficulty may be at a different level, but the experience is always the same. The awareness of being outside the comfort zone: not so far that you are on a bed of nails, but not too comfortable either. That place where each of us is driven to achieve our absolute best.

Recommended reading: Mark Murphy’s latest study, “Why SMART Goals are Dumb,” shares groundbreaking research on why SMART Goals can lead to subpar performance. Jeitosa readers can get a complimentary download of the study by clicking this link:<http://www.leadershipiq.com/smartgoals.html>

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