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# Locke's Goal Setting Theory - Peakon's Heroes of Employee Engagement

5-6 minutes

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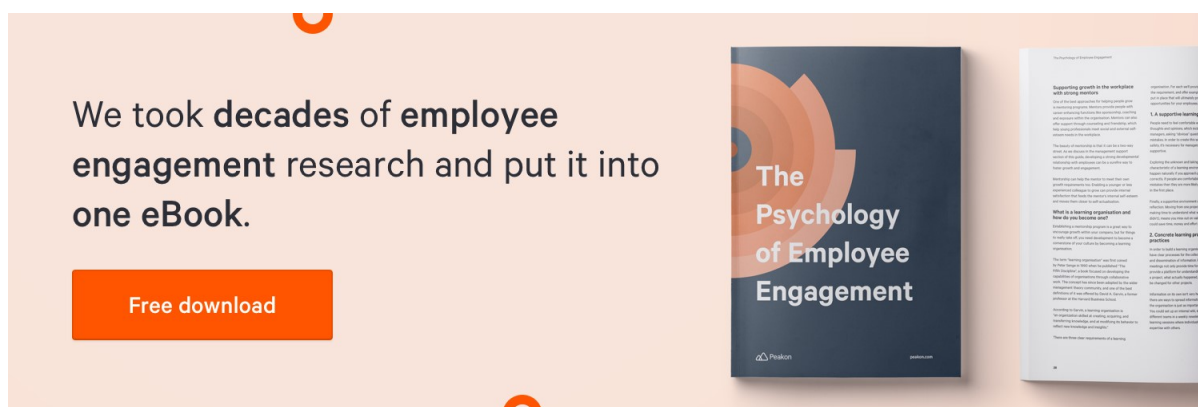
Locke's Goal Setting Theory gave us the blueprint for modern workplace motivation by making the direct relationship between goals, productivity and employee engagement both clear, and actionable.

In 1968, Edwin A. Locke published his groundbreaking Goal Setting Theory in [Toward a Theory of Task Motivation and Incentive](#). In it, he demonstrated that employees are motivated by clear, well-defined goals and feedback, and that a little workplace challenge is no bad thing.

## Locke's Goal Setting Theory

Locke's primary revelation was around the power of setting specific and measurable goals, rather than keeping outcomes general. With his theory he demonstrated how targets like "increase sales by 20%" or "reach a customer NPS of 50" are much more effective than vague direction such as "complete your work to a higher standard". This might seem obvious to those of us who have sat down to work out our KPIs, but this really was Locke's brainchild. He gave us the foundation for modern goal-setting which had momentous practical implications for managers.

Locke also demonstrated that the best way to feel motivated is to push yourself to do something that you're not 100% certain you can achieve. Tackling challenging goals headfirst allows you to work hard, develop your skills and reap the rewards in terms of positive feedback and a sense of personal achievement. Speaking directly to Locke ourselves, he noted that managers can also use “impossible” goals to promote creativity – employees just need to be assured that there's no punishment for not meeting ambitious targets.



## Applying Locke's Goal Setting Theory to employee engagement

A few years after its publication, Dr. Gary Latham started studying Locke's theory in practice, and soon confirmed that the link between goal-setting and performance was both real, and crucial. Later, in the 1990s, Locke and Latham collaborated and published *A Theory of Goal Setting & Task Performance*, which expanded on 1968's *Goal-Setting Theory*, and became a key manual for employee engagement.

In *A Theory of Goal Setting*, Locke and Latham broke down goals into two main characteristics: Content and Intensity. Content is the outcome of the task, and Intensity is the resource required to

achieve it – which can be both mental and physical. The theory highlighted the importance of considering the whole journey of completing a goal and not just the outcome. Involving employees in directing the route taken to complete a task was shown to increase their motivation to reach the target.

Together Locke and Latham described five key principles of goal-setting:

1. Be clear. A goal must be specific.
2. Make it challenging. An easy or tedious goal is demotivating. But keep a realistic balance: don't expect anyone on your team to spin straw into gold.
3. Secure commitment from your team. Your employees have to understand and buy in to the goal from the outset.
4. Provide regular feedback throughout the whole process. This helps to keep the goal on track.
5. Consider the task's complexity. Think about realistic timescales, and break down the process into sub-goals with regular reviews.

## **Understanding Locke's Goal Setting Theory as engagement 'drivers'**

The beauty of Locke's work is that it doesn't just apply to [Goal-Setting](#), but can also be thought of in terms of other employee engagement drivers.

The concept of Intensity, and the importance of consulting employees on the approach to a goal, highlights a crucial need for [Autonomy](#) in the workplace. In order for employees to feel intrinsically motivated to complete a task, Locke showed that they

need to be involved in its conception, and afforded a degree of freedom in how they tackle it.

Similarly, the value Locke places on setting hard-to-reach goals can be considered as a way to promote a sense of [Accomplishment](#). By pushing employees outside of their comfort zone, they are more likely to achieve that overwhelming sense of pride you get when you outperform your own expectations.

One final word from Edwin Locke himself: it is vital to first make sure that employees have the task-based knowledge and essential skills to succeed (think [Maslow](#)'s basic needs). As soon as they are equipped to start tackling their targets, managers can maximise their employees' potential by following the key principles of goal-setting.

*Also in this series:*

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