



By James E. Leemann, Ph.D.

“Zero is the goal” It’s an empty slogan without required resources

“Managers who don’t know how to measure what they want, settle for wanting what they can measure.”¹

Russell L. Ackoff, Ph.D.

For the better part of the last two decades, most corporations have fallen prey to obsessively using “zero” to define virtually every safety and health goal, not to mention the plethora of environmental goals – waste, emissions, GHG, carbon footprints, spills, leaks, and on and on.

To those in senior management positions, “Zero is the Goal” is a simple, easy-to-remember catch phrase. Safety and health pros welcome senior management’s support, but still struggle to convince management that human, material, and financial resources are necessary to reach this laudable goal of “zero.” Too often senior managers arbitrarily set goals and have no clue as to what it will take to meet the goals.

For many at the worker level (where most injuries occur), “Zero is the Goal” is contemptible. Factory-floor operators and mechanics are cognizant of the fact that they do not work or live in a “risk-free world.” These folks can live with the high probability, low consequence injuries many encounter during their career. It is the low probability, high consequence events they lose sleep over.

Slogans like “Zero is the Goal” are fine as long as management is willing to provide the resources to do the more difficult and expensive safety and health program activities. Otherwise, workers who face the hazards on the factory floor will view these slogans as nothing more than corporate popycock.

Setting safety & health goals

For more than four decades research-



ers have focused on the benefits of using goal setting to enhance business performance. In fact, goal setting is so ingrained in today’s business cultures that it would be hard to imagine a business being successful without some form of goals.

In 1968, Edwin A. Locke’s research revealed that there is a direct relationship between the difficulty of a specific goal and an individual’s performance to accomplish the goal. In particular, Locke found that hard goals produced a higher level of performance than easy goals; specific hard goals produced a higher level of output than a “do your best” goal; and behavioral intentions regulated choice behavior.²

Goal-setting principles

In 1990, Edwin Locke and Gary Latham collaborated on their seminal work in the field of goal setting, publishing their book “A Theory of Goal Setting and Task Performance.”³ Using Locke and Latham’s *Goal Setting Principles*, here is what you should consider when setting next year’s safety and health goals.

First, consider the **clarity** principle. Safety and health goals need to be clearly measurable, unambiguous, and behavioral with a definite timeframe for completion. Although admirable, “Zero is the Goal” does not clearly convey what one must specifically do or change in order to achieve “Zero.” As a vision, “Zero is the Goal” is what all companies strive for, but operators and mechanics are more receptive to specific goals with allocated time and resources that directly relate to their work environment (e.g., Reduce process risk exposures by 75 percent from the 2005 base year by 2012).

Then consider the principle of **challenge**. Safety and health goals need to appeal to the achievement motive of employees. Interestingly enough, achievement-motivated employees stray away from very hard goals for fear they will not achieve the goal. Additionally, these same employees will tend to ignore easily achievable goals because they think they do not offer genuine challenge. Assigning difficult goals is fine, as long as they are realistic and attainable.

Next, consider the **commitment** principle. Safety and health goals created in a vacuum will lack the necessary buy-in from those who are expected to deliver the goal. Make a solid effort to encourage employees to be involved in develop-

ing not only their personal goals, but also those of the corporation.

Incorporate the **feedback** principle. Safety and health goals, especially ones that take a long time to accomplish, need a built-in and routine feedback mechanism to allow employees to know how are they doing and whether they are going in the right direction or need to make adjustments. Consider breaking down more complex safety and health goals into reasonable pieces with specific milestones that can be tracked.

Finally, there is the **task complexity** principle. Safety and health goals need to have a realistic timeframe based on the difficulty to achieve the goal. Allowances need to be taken into account if the employee tasked with the goal requires additional training and practice to master new skills to deliver the goal. In this case consider including a learning goal that compliments the performance goal.

Goal-setting pitfalls

In 2006, Latham and Locke identified ten pitfalls they associated with goal setting.⁴ Three years later, in 2009, controversy erupted in the “goal setting” community when Ordóñez, *et al.* published

their *Goals Gone Wild*⁵ article criticizing the lack of research attention given to the downsides of goal setting. Locke and Latham responded to Ordóñez, *et al.*'s with both barrels blazing.⁶

Academic jousting aside, the authors raise a number of goal setting downsides worth paying attention to when setting safety and health goals. A sampling of some include: adverse effect on risk taking, elevated stress levels, feelings of failure, ignoring non-goal performance areas, dishonesty and cheating, lack of skill or knowledge, being overwhelmed by too many goals, setting unattainable goals, eroding cooperation within groups due to competitive personal goals, decreased intrinsic motivation, unfair monetary rewards, and inhibited learning.

The keys in setting safety and health goals to ensure success are to encourage participation in the development of the goals and to ensure adequate time and resources are provided to accomplish the goals, while being mindful of the potential pitfalls.

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1 Ackoff, R.L. and H.J. Addison. 2007. *Management f-Laws – how organizations really work*. Triarchy Press. Axminster, UK.

2 Locke, E.A. 1968. *Toward a theory of Task Motivation and Incentives*. In *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*. 3.2: 157-189.

3 Locke, E.A. and G.P. Latham. 1990. *A Theory of Goal Setting and Task Performance*. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

4 Latham, G.P. and E.A. Locke. *Enhancing the Benefits and Overcoming the Pitfalls of Goal Setting*. In *Organizational Dynamics*. 35(4): 332-340.

5 Ordóñez, L.D., M.E. Schweitzer, A.D. Galinsky and M.H. Bazerman. *Goals Gone Wild: The Systematic Side Effects of Overprescribing Goal Setting*. In *Academy of Management Perspectives*. 23(1): 6-16.

6 Locke, E.A. and G.P. Latham. *Has Goal Setting Gone Wild, or Have Its Attackers Abandoned Good Scholarship?* In *Academy of Management Perspectives*. 23(1): 17-23.



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